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QUIET NIGHT

NO, SHERIFF JOHN KELLUND DOUBTED IF THERE'D BE ANY BANK ROBBERS TO THROW DOWN ON TONIGHT, OR ANY HONKATONK LADIES TO RESCUE FROM HELLIONS, OR ANY NOTCH-HUNTERS TO MATCH GUNSPEED WITH.... DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL BY

WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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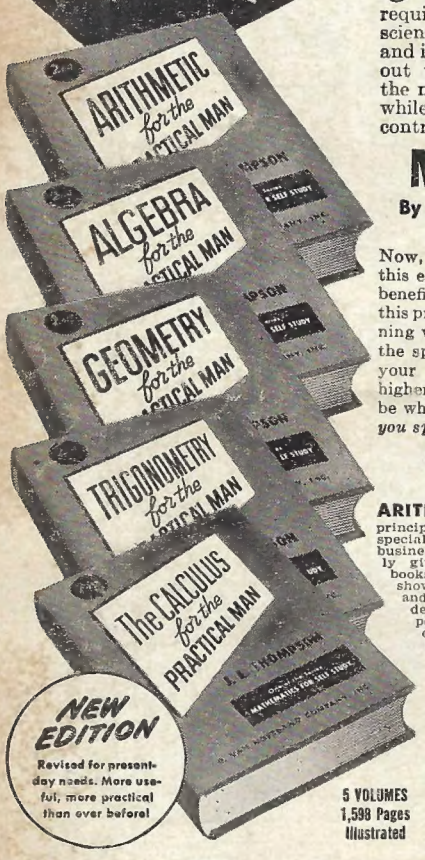
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CHAPTER 1

Cold Trail

THE NEW day's flat, blood-red light threw John Kellund's distorted shadow along the powdery dust of Latigo's main street, as he turned in at his jail office. The clock in the Cattlemen's Exchange Bank tower was striking five, reminding the sheriff of how faithfully he had kept this daily ritual during the twenty years he'd worn the star.

Out of long habit, he glanced across the street and saw Daws Ramont having his breakfast coffee at the upper-story window of the bank. They exchanged waves, but the usual shouted insults between the old friends were missing this morning, each remembering this was the last time they would perform the ritual.

NO, SHERIFF JOHN KELLUND DOUBTED IF THERE WOULD BE ANY BANK ROBBERS TO THROW DOWN ON TONIGHT, OR ANY HONKATONK LADIES TO RESCUE FROM HELLIONS, OR ANY NOTCH-HUNTERS TO MATCH GUNSPEED WITH.....

DRAMATIC FEATURE-LENGTH NOVEL by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

John Kellund had been bucking the law of averages to survive so many consecutive terms in office. Yet here he was, fulfilling the pledge he had first given his daughter Becky, and more recently the voters of Coyotero County: Come seventy, he would retire, turn over his star to a younger man...

His crony Ben Buxton, the aging night marshal of the town, was hanging his guns on the rack to end another tour of duty when John Kellund stepped into the office. That, too, was a routine which never varied, year in and year out; and so was Kellund's drawled greeting: "Quiet night, Ben?"

The question was ludicrous, sometimes, but it always came. Like a month ago, when a lone bandit had robbed the Cattlemen's Exchange while Daws Ramont was absent in Tucson. The outlaw had left the mark of his lead on marshal and sheriff that night, but the following morning when Kellund returned from Doc Bright's office after getting a slug probed from his shoulder, he had greeted Ben Buxton with that same "Quiet night?"

And Buxton's answer had been the same as now: "Tol'able."

John Kellund went over to the roll-top desk he shared with Buxton, took out a tin can containing a tightly-pressed bale of Kentucky stogies, pried a couple loose, handed one to Buxton and stood by while the marshal held a match for him.

Any other morning, Buxton would have grunted, "See you tonight, Jawn," and headed for his quarters in the Drover's Hotel. But today, being different from all the others, the old marshal tarried, vaguely embarrassed. Buxton was six years older than the sheriff and as long as he could handle saloon brawls and ride herd on the Saturday night drunks, he would go on wearing his star.

"It is a comfort," Buxton commented, "knowin' the new sheriff will be a kin of yores, Jawn."

Kellund murmured, "Tom Ramont is a good man."

"The town," Buxton said, "is a heap more civilized than when you

QUIET NIGHT

Lining his gunsights on that escaping bandit, did the hard-bitten old lawman maybe aim wide on purpose? Because everybody had always figured John Kellund would carry his shooting eye to his grave . . . . .

For a good five seconds Kellund had his target notched in his gunsight.

first pinned on the star. You made it so."

"The three of us made is so, Ben. You and Daws and me."

Ben Buxton was looking at his colleague of two decades as if seeing him for the first time. A week over his three score and ten mark, John Kellund could have passed for fifty. The ramrod posture he had carried over from his hitch with the cavalry at Fort Bowie, had not been warped by the years. The dragoon mustache guarding Kellund's decisive mouth had been jet black once, Buxton was remembering, but it was silvery now.

Deep ruts were scored in Kellund's cheeks, but they appeared to be laugh-lines rather than the erosion of time. Kellund's metal-blue eyes were as clear as in his youth; his leather-dark hands could draw a gun and hold it rock-steady. In all the years Buxton had known him, Kellund had only missed one target when the blue chips were down.

Buxton said casually, "When's this weddin', now?" as if he didn't know that Becky Kellund had set the date months back to correspond with the day Tom would be promoted from a deputy to full-fledged sheriff.

"High noon at the church," Kellund spoke around his cheroot, "but don't forget Tom's swearing-in ceremony at ten sharp. Won't be legal without you're there, so take it easy tonight, Ben."

THE HARD-BITTEN old marshal limped past Kellund, favoring the half-healed gunshot wound in his right hip. He paused in the doorway, staring at the brick facade of Daws Ramont's bank. There was a spider-webbed hole in the plate glass window fronting the street. Put there by John Kellund who, lining his gun-sights on an escaping bandit, had seemed unaccountably, to aim wide. The riddle of that miss still troubled Ben Buxton. He knew his own gun-skill was getting rusty, but he figured Kellund would carry his shooting eye to the grave.

"A danged shame," Buxton voiced the run of his thoughts, "we didn't save Daws' bank for him that night. That's the only string you'll be leavin' untied when Tom takes over tomorrow."

There was no hint of accusation in the marshal's voice; for he, and not the sheriff, had been officially on duty that night. It was Buxton and deputy sheriff Tim Lansingh, now dead, who had bucked the outlaw's guns inside the bank. But the marshal's comment tautened the lips under John Kellund's shaggy mustache. He thought, as he had thought so often during the past month whenever he caught Buxton's quizzical glance on him. How much does Ben suspect? And did my eyes deceive me that night or not?

"The case is not closed," Kellund reminded his venerable *compadre.*

Ben Buxton's shoulders lifted and fell. "A trail gets mighty cold after four weeks. See you tonight, Jawn."

A depression of spirit settled on John Kellund as he watched his old crony hobble slantwise across the street toward his hotel. Kellund's eyes shifted back to the bank, noting that Tom's father was no longer at his window table, on the second-story level.

His glance lowered to the plate glass window, where the day-break shed star-pointed light from the bullet hole, and made the brass padlock on the door shine like burnished gold.

He wondered if the lock would ever come off the Cattlemen's Exchange in his time. Everyone in Coyotero County wondered. This was the second successive year of drought in the Territory; here in Latigo, the economy of the entire range depended on its bank.

The Cattlemen's Exchange had lost better than a hundred thousand in cash from that robbery, Ramont's books revealed. Old Daws, as president and cashier, exuded optimism in public, but the doors remained shut, though the examiners had come and gone a fortnight ago.

If the Exchange went under, Latigo would fail with it, sink into the limbo of a ghost town. And all because John Kellund's gun had missed its target, for the escaping bandit had loomed big as a barn door, vaulting aboard his waiting saddle horse,

the gunnysack of loot slung over one shoulder.

It was a grim situation for an outgoing sheriff to leave his successor. Especially when that successor was to become his own son-in-law in a little more than twenty-four hours from now...

The stogie turned sour on Kellund's tongue and he flipped it into the cuspidor beside his desk. It was a desk which, for the first time in the sheriff's memory, was neat and tidy.

During the past week he had cleaned out the personal junk he had accumulated in two decades. The wanted posters had been sorted, the obsolete or canceled cases burned last night in the potbelly stove.

His paperwork had been brought up to date, so young Tom would be starting with a fresh slate, an unwritten page. Inventories of county livestock, firearms and other gear entrusted to the office had been set in order, tallied down to the last postage stamp and spare cartridge.

Kellund stepped over to the bullpen door, lifting a hand to rub the wad of bandage still taped to his left shoulder. He noted that Ben Buxton had hooked the connecting door open to ventilate the cell block; the old man had mopped and scrubbed during the slack hours of the night just past.

The six-iron-latticed cages in there were empty, cot mattresses neatly rolled back, army fashion. No prisoners on the book. Unless Buxton jailed a drunk tonight, Tom Ramont would be stepping into a spic-and-span set-up here tomorrow, the jail as fresh and tidy as the little frame cottage over on Postoak Street where he and Becky would be setting up housekeeping.

John Kellund forced himself to open his filing cabinet and take out the newly-printed dodger which was the only item Tom would find in his Unsolved Cases folder. Duplicates of this cardboard poster had been mailed to law-enforcement agencies from Texas to Nevada within the past two weeks. Almost anywhere you looked in Coyotero County you would find one tacked on telegraph poles, barn doors, postoffice bulletin boards, saloon walls.

Dawes Ramont, Tom's father, had composed the text of the notice, as head of the bank which was offering the reward:

$2,000 WILL BE PAID IN HAND

for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the anonymous person who robbed the Cattlemen's Exchange Bank of this city on the night of April 29, 1893, resulting in the murder of Deputy Sheriff Tim Lansingh and the wounding of Sheriff John Kellund and Marshal Benjamin Buxton.

Loot amounted to $114,000 in U.S. specie and unmarked currency. Wire or write the undersigned:

DAWES W. RAMONT, Pres.-Cashier Cattlemen's Exchange Bank, Latigo, Arizona Territory

or

JOHN M. KELLUND, Sheriff, Coyotero County, Ariz. Terr.

CHAPTER 2

Some Bad News

AT SIX o'clock Kellund straddled a stool at Woo Fong's American Restaurant, as was his invariable habit, and had his breakfast half finished when a friendly hand clapped him on the back and roused him out of the black chasm of his thoughts.

"You'll straighten them shoulders when they aren't weighed down by that tin star, Dad!" came Tom Ramont's boisterous greeting, as his deputy of the last five years joined him at the Chinaman's counter. "Coffee and wheats, Woo Fong."

The sheriff managed a grin as he met Tom's eyes. At twenty-eight, young Ramont was getting an early start at the law-enforcement business. He was a strapping six-footer who had been East to college, studying modern banking methods so he could step into Daws' shoes at the Cattlemen's Exchange, but Tom Ramont

was not cut out for imprisonment behind the gilded bars of a teller's cage or a deep-cushioned chair in the president's walnut-paneled office.

Back from college, Tom Ramont had swapped his sheepskin for a ball-pointed silver star engraved DEPUTY SHERIFF, grooming himself for the job he would be taking over tomorrow.

"For a bridegroom only a day short of gettin' a ring through yore nose, you look spry an' frisky, Tom."

Tom Ramont cuffed back his flat-crowned stetson, running splayed fingers through his shock of jet-black hair. There was a tiny fish-hook-shaped scar above his right eyebrow which he had brought home as proof that he had earned his intercollegiate boxing championship in his sophomore year.

Seeing the scar, John Kellund breathed a little secret prayer that when Tom Ramont was in his shoes, quitting his chosen career, that scar would be the only one he would carry...

"I got strict orders to shy clear of the block where Mrs. Blaine's millinery shop is located," Ramont chuckled. "Becky's havin' her final fitting for the bridal gown this morning. Says it'd be bad luck for me to see my bride decked out in her hunting clothes before the wedding."

They sipped their coffee in silence, no more small talk left in them. Finally Kellund dropped a four-bit piece on the Chinaman's counter and slid off the stool.

"You shy clear of the office today, too," the sheriff said with mock gruffness. "A month from now you'll be sick of the place. A year from now you'll be bracing your Dad for that job waitin' for you across the street."

Tom Ramont looked up, his voice suddenly husky, his eyes grave.

"Talked with Dad last night," Tom said. "Started out to be, you know, one of those man-to-man talks you have just before you get decked out in double harness. He gave me some bad news, John."

Kellund looked away, knowing what was coming. He said, "So the bank's not going to reopen..."

Tom Ramont picked at the stack of buttered wheatcakes on his plate.

"Reckon not, John. Dad's withholding the examiners' verdict until after the wedding. Then he's clearing out. Says he can't endure staying around Latigo, watching it tumble into ruin along with the bank that's been his whole life."

John Kellund said carefuly, choosing his words, "Daws can't blame himself for that robbery. Hell, he was over in Tucson when it happened."

Tom shrugged, "He blames himself for not installing a thief-proof vault, years ago. Put too much faith in that combination lock. Figured as long as he was the only person who knew how to open it, it wouldn't be opened during his absence."

The sheriff repeated doggedly, "Your father can't assume any blame for what happened. Other banks have had their vaults blown wide open—banks with modern safes."

TOM RAMONT looked up, his eyes bleak. "John, how much do you stand to lose? You've never mentioned it. But it must be every penny you've saved since you left the army."

John Kellund made an elaborate business out of lighting up his after-breakfast cigar. He was remembering that he had borrowed money against his last salary check to buy Tom and Becky a set of dishes as a wedding gift.

"What little cash I lost," he said, "I can forget about. I got my horses, good fishin', good huntin'. Bank failures don't affect those kind of assets, Tom."

Something akin to desperation was in Tom Ramont's manner now. "What's going to happen to this town when the news breaks, John? What's going to happen to Coyotero County? The folks in town, every rancher in the district...they had all their eggs in Dad's basket."

John Kellund's smile was bleak. "You know the old saying in our business, Tom. Murder will always out. That bank robber left a dead man behind. Keep your eyes and ears open. Sooner or later, a clue will drop. Be ready for it."

Tom Ramont shook his head skeptically. "It's a cold trail, and getting

colder. That piddling reward Dad posted won't turn the trick. Whoever made that haul is probably a long way out of the Territory by now, enjoying the spending of it."

"Unless," Kellund said, "it was an inside job..."

Shortly after eight o'clock John Kellund was in the county stables feeding and watering his remuda of saddle stock. Then he returned to his office, to find it already crowded with old friends coming to wish him luck.

The bank clock was striking ten when Becky dropped in on her way to the seamstress'. She was twenty, in the full ripening bloom of womanhood, a golden-haired girl who more and more of late was turning into the image of the mother who had died bringing Becky into the world.

It had happened out at the homestead, and the memory of a crib and a coffin side by side had driven John Kellund to town with his baby daughter. About the only job open to a fifty-year-old retired cavalry sergeant was wearing a law badge, and so he had run for sheriff at a time when sheriffs didn't last long in Latigo.

"Dad," Becky laughed, "I'll bet this is the longest day of your life, isn't it? But wait until you're leading me up the aisle to the altar tomorrow. *That* walk will take an eternity."

Kellund had to brace himself to keep from wincing when she hugged him, the pressure setting up darting needles of pain in the bullet-smashed shoulder.

He joshed, "Was talkin' to Tom over at the Chinaman's this morning, honey. Seemed to me he was showin' every sign of wanting to back out on this matrimony deal you suckered him into."

Becky shook her head. "Well, he's too late. I've got him hogtied for branding."

Kellund grunted. "Mebbe. Anyhow he got me to send him up-county on a tax-collecting junket, to get the feel of his new job. He won't be back till a week from Friday."

Becky showed mock horror at the news. "Well," she said, "I'll be waiting. Maybe the greenery on the church bower will have wilted, but I won't. Tom's stuck with me and he knows it."

SHE WAS on her way, then, heading for the millinery shop, and before John Kellund's eyes had a chance to mist over the jail office was filling up again with cowhands and townspeople wishing him luck and telling him how much they'd miss him around the old haunts.

Parson Grimes, the Methodist skypilot who had been an army chaplain in Kellund's regiment at Bowie in the old days and who had been responsible for bringing Kellund out to Latigo to file on a donation claim, dropped in shortly after eleven.

"Next time I see you, John," the parson laughed over their handshake, "you'll have Becky on your arm and a vacant look in your eye. I wanted to catch you while you were still in possession of your faculties."

Kellund brushed a gnarled fist across eyes that were suddenly misty. He was remembering, in this moment, what a key figure this Paul Grimes had played in his life. As a cavalry chaplain he had officiated at Kellund's wedding over at Fort Bowie; later he had laid the bride of a year to rest out on the river homestead, and baptized little Becky the same day.

Tomorrow Paul Grimes would be hearing the vows of Tom Ramont and his little girl, now grown; and if the minister survived the lawman, he would some day round out the circle when they buried John Kellund beside his wife...

"You are passing that badge along to a fine man, John," the minister went on, reaching out to touch the silver star pinned to Kellund's suspender. "I pray God that Tom will wear that emblem as proudly as you have done. A star without a fleck of tarnish on it...You can be a proud man today, John Kellund."

A hard, throbbing ache caught the old sheriff in the throat.

"See you tomorrow," he made an attempt at levity, "in church."

He knew the home place would be crowded with womenfolks, helping

Becky with last-minute details for the reception to be held following the church wedding tomorrow, so Kellund ate his noon meal at the Chinaman's and then, finding the dragging hours too much for him, saddled up and rode out of town where he could be alone with his conscience.

Out at the river homestead, kneeling bareheaded beside the flower-blooming mound of his wife's grave under the cottonwoods, John Kellund prayed to the God who had seemed very close to him throughout a hazardous life, both as soldier and lawman, a God who had deserted him only once: that night of the bank robbery.

"God," John Kellund prayed, "what would You have done if'n You'd have been in my place? So much hingin' on the yank of a trigger, other lives to think about besides my own..."

CHAPTER 3 Best Friend

IT WAS past sundown when Sheriff John Kellund rode back into Latigo. He unsaddled in the jail stable, fed and watered his horse, and then headed for the jail office, knowing Ben Buxton was back on duty.

Buxton had a visitor, the one visitor Kellund had missed during the morning. His best friend for twenty years, Daws Ramont, who at fifty was the same age Kellund had been when he became sheriff.

"John," Daws Ramont greeted him, "where in the devil you been?"

"Fightin' a battle," Kellund said cryptically. "With myself."

The mumbled answer escaped the two men facing him. Kellund was thinking, in a way you and I have built up Coyotero County, into what it is, Daws. And it was so; these men had arrived in Latigo the same year, one to found a bank, the other to bring law and order to an untamed land. Each had depended upon the other; for the bank had brought permanancy and solidity to Latigo, while Kellund's gun rule had made the town a place where decent people could move and sink roots.

Down the years, Daws Ramont was always a flashy dresser, putting on a prosperous front even during the lean years. The banker's face was gaunt and heavy-boned, his brown spade beard giving his features a benevolent, almost Lincolnian cast. Right now, Daws Ramont's eyes showed the dull glint of despair.

"John, I know this is your big day and I hate to sound a sour note," Ramont said heavily. "But I'll go out of my mind if I don't tell someone. John...the Cattlemen's Exchange is finished."

Kellund seated himself facing the two men, giving no hint that Daws' son had already told him the bad news.

"I've known the worst for two weeks now," Ramont went on. "I begged the examiners not to break the news until day after tomorrow, so as not to cast a blight on our kids' wedding day, John."

Kellund let a silence build up before he said, "No one in Coyotero County holds anything against you, Daws. It ain't as if the bank failed through bad investments or too much credit."

Ramont said bitterly, "It's worse than that, John. Depositors could forgive errors of banking judgement. But if I hadn't been out of town that night, the robbery wouldn't have happened."

Kellund's brows lifted. "How so?"

Ramont stared at his manicured fingers. "If I hadn't gone over to Tucson to brag and strut at a banker's convention, I would have been upstairs in my living quarters that night. I would have heard that bandit prying the lock off the back door."

Ben Buxton commented gently, "And you'd have come tearin' downstairs in your drawers and got yourself shot, like Tim did, like I almost did. No, Daws. You're takin' this too hard. If anybody's to blame, it's me for not tagging that desperado."

A heavy silence filled the office, the two lawmen going over in their minds the events of that night, the mistakes they had made. Ben Buxton, making his routine rounds, had discovered the lock pried off the back door of the Cattlemen's Exchange

around two in the morning. He had summoned one of Kellund's two deputies, Tim Lansingh, away from a poker game next door; and the two had entered the bank in time to see an explosion rip the door off Ramont's old-fashioned safety vault.

A bullet out of the gloom had cut down Lansingh, another had dropped Ben Buxton with a crippled thigh. By the time he had dragged his way into the lobby the vault had been looted and the lone desperado was heading for his waiting horse out front.

Destiny was a strange thing. That night Sheriff Kellund had been doctoring a sick horse in the barn behind the jail; the roar of the blast had brought him running. Reaching the street, he had been in time to see a masked man vaulting into stirrups, toting a tell-tale gunnysack over one shoulder.

The bank robber was a sitting-duck target in the moonlight. For a good five seconds John Kellund had his target notched in his gunsights, a target he couldn't miss. But he had. His bullet had gone ten feet off line, punching a hole in the plate glass window.

Before he could correct his aim and squeeze off another shot the bandit's slug had caught him in the shoulder, putting him out of business. And the wind scouring off the outer desert had erased all sign of where the escaping bandit had headed.

THE FOLLOWING day, when the Tucson Express brought Daws Ramont back to Latigo, two wounded lawmen confronted him with the news that the Cattlemen's Exchange had been cleaned out, that the outlaw responsible had a clean getaway...

The sound of John Kellund clearing his throat snapped Daws Ramont and Ben Buxton out of their thoughts.

"You're both blamin' yourselves," the old sheriff said, "when the fault was actually mine. Not trusting my own eyesight that night. Not being able to think things out straight when the chips were down. Selling out a whole range rather than bring tragedy down on my loved ones."

Ben Buxton looked up. The night marshal said sharply, "Are you tryin' to tell us you deliberately missed gunnin' down that bandido, Jawn?"

The sheriff reached up to rub a horny palm across the furbished metal of his silver star, rubbing a tarnish that didn't show but which was eaten deep into the veneer of honor that badge represented.

"I had a dead bead on that hombre," John Kellund confessed, "but I pulled my gun wide. Whatever ruin comes to this range, the blame is mine alone."

Ramont was staring at his old friend as if in a trance.

"You see," Kellund went on, "when that bandido was forkin' his horse a gust of wind lifted the bandanna offn his face. The moon was full that night and I got a good look at that face. For the past month I been tryin' to tell myself my eyes played me false. But in my heart I've known they didn't."

Daws Ramont came abruptly to his feet. Unaccountably, old Ben Buxton slipped a shell under the hammer of the gun he had been oiling and said in a strange tone, "Just set tight, Daws, and let's hear Jawn out. The face you saw under that mask was Daws Ramont's, wasn't it, Jawn?"

Kellund's mouth pulled at his cheroot, his eyes tragic.

"If I hadn't thought my eyes had played me false, Daws, you would have been lyin' dead in the street that night, with a sack full of loot from your own bank. I held my fire. You didn't."

The color had drained from the banker's face. "You're joking, of course," he cawed out. "Why, I was in Tucson that night—"

Kellund shook his head. "I've had a month to unravel where you must have really been, Daws. You could have left that convention a day early, got off the train at Apache Wells, horsebacked across the desert and stuck up the Cattlemen's Exchange, dynamitin' the vault to make it look good. Easy enough to have rode back to the Wells and boarded a train the next day, with the windstorm blottin'

out your tracks. That's how it had to be, no other way."

Daws Ramont had recovered his full composure now. He said in a strained voice, "If this is your idea of a practical joke, John, I consider it damned inappropriate, considering the strain I've been under all these weeks. Hell, my being your best friend wouldn't have stayed your trigger a split second. I know you too well for that."

Kellund said hoarsely, "Who can say how a man will react when the chips are down, no time to think anything through? Even with your bullet knockin' me down, Daws, I wasn't thinking so much of covering your crime, protecting your reputation, as I was of our kids. I was thinking what it would mean to Tom's career, being branded the son of a killer, and him on the verge of marryin' my daughter...I guess it was Becky I was thinkin' of that night, Daws, when I pulled my shot wide of your brisket, held my fire until you had got out of range."

A grin broke the fixture of Daws Ramont's lips, a patronizing grin. He turned to glance contemptuously at the taut-held six-gun in Ben Buxton's fist.

"Go ahead—what are you waiting for?" he jeered at the marshal. "Lock me up. Send Lawyer Adams over to talk with me."

Buxton's glance broke before the banker's drilling stare. He thrust a dubious look at the old sheriff across the room, his eyes asking a question.

"Sure, Ben," John Kellund sighed. "Lock him up, after you frisk him for concealed weapons. This is out in the open now. I've got to carry through on it."

Buxton moved in on the banker, then halted as Daws Ramont lifted a warning hand.

"One minute, gentlemen. Do either of you have any idea of the consequences of submitting a law-abiding citizen to false arrest? Are either of you old codgers ready to do a stretch on a rock pile?"

Buxton quavered, "Jawn, are you dead sure your eyesight was levelin' with you that night? Moonlight can play tricks—"

"Lock him up, Ben."

Daws Ramont brushed off Buxton's reaching hand and walked voluntarily to the bullpen door. In the act of stepping into the cell block he turned to face the sheriff.

"You poor fool, John. Why, I've got a dozen witnesses who can prove I was in Tucson when my bank was robbed. What are you doing—trying to make Tom and Becky hate you for what this will do to them?"

John Kellund sank heavily into his worn chair. "Lock him up, Ben," he repeated dully.

CHAPTER 4 Ace In The Hole

FIVE MINUTES later Ben Buxton emerged from the cell block and twisted the big key in the iron door. He found the sheriff standing in the doorway, shoulders slumped, face gaunt. It seemed that in this short interval John Kellund had aged twenty years.

"Jawn," the old marshal said hesitantly, "I hope you ain't gone off half-cocked. What if Ramont *can* establish an alibi? Can you prove he left Tucson a day early and made that hossback jaunt over the desert from Apache Wells? Was that just guesswork on yore part, Jawn?"

Kellund turned to face the night marshal. "That part of it was guesswork, Ben."

Buxton scrubbed his bald pate with a bandanna, his warped cheeks glistening with perspiration in the lamplight.

"Spottin' that bandit when the wind blowed up his mask—was that a hunch too?"

John Kellund shook his head slowly, like a man emerging from the toils of a nightmare.

"I wish to heaven it was, Ben. But I'm sure of it. I had to be sure of it—to pull my gunsights off his brisket."

Ben Buxton looked scared. A humble man, he had always put banker Daws Ramont on a high pedestal. Even now, trusting John Kellund's word as he did, knowing the personal sacrifice the sheriff was ready to take to right things with his own con-

science, the night marshal could not bring himself to believe that Daws Ramont could willingly ruin his own bank and drag the entire cattle land down to ruin with it.

"We didn't play our cards right tonight, Jawn," Ben Buxton panted. "We should've give Ramont enough rope to hang hisself with. He was fixin' to leave town. Accordin' to yore theory, he'd of moved away an' retired on the money he stole. We could've tracked him down later, caught him with the goods..."

After a long pause John Kellund said, "That's our ace in the hole, Ben. The bank loot. What did Ramont do with it? He wouldn't run the risk of toting it back to Latigo in his carpetbag, comin' home from Tucson. He's a lone wolf—he wouldn't have left that gunnysack with anyone to keep. Somewhere between here and Apache Wells he must of stashed it, to pick up later."

Ben Buxton's eyes narrowed. "Maybe I begin to get your drift, Jawn," the old marshal said....

When John Kellund left the jail office ten minutes later it was with the intention of going over to his cottage on the far corner of the courthouse plaza, knowing he would find Tom over there with Becky.

But midway across the street he changed his mind and ducked back into the inky gut of the alley between the jail building and the mercantile store, on his way to the stable shed in the rear.

He saddled up two horses, his own claybank gelding and the leggy *bayo coyote* stallion which Tom Ramont had raised from a foal, the mount he always used when riding posse.

Leading the horses out of the barn, the sheriff tied them in the blot of shadow behind Ferguson's blacksmith shop, fifty yards from the jail stable.

Even then, he did not head toward home. Instead he slipped back to the rear of the jail and, fishing in his levis pocket for a key, let himself into the woodshed built as a lean-to against the cellblock wall.

He seated himself on a sawhorse, focussing his attention on the iron-barred opening high on the inside wall which, before the woodshed addition had been built, was one of the outer windows of the cellblock.

Distinctly to his ears came the ceaseless pacing of a man's boots on the brick floor of one of the cells. Daws Ramont, thinking things out behind iron bars...

JOHN KELLUND had been waiting less than twenty minutes when events began to shape up as he expected. He heard the front office door open, as Ben Buxton came in from his first tour of the town's deadfalls and honkytonks. Almost at once he heard Daws Ramont bellow from the cellblock, "Ben, that you? Come in here."

Lamplight glowed in the overhead window as the night marshal unlocked the bullpen door.

"You're wantin' me to fetch yore lawyer over, Daws?" Buxton inquired. "I already tried his room at the Drover's. He ain't in."

Kellund had to strain his ears to catch Ramont's hoarse whisper: "Ben, come over here. Look at me....Ben, we've known each other a long time. Do you think I'm guilty of sticking up my own bank?"

There was a pause. Kellund could visualize the bony old night marshal standing outside the banker's cell.

"Daws, I swear I don't know what to think. But you heard my orders. Sheriff out-ranks me. He figgers he's got the deadwood on you."

Daws Ramont said quickly, "Then in your own mind you haven't condemned me as guilty. That's a comfort... Look, Ben. How old are you?"

"Goin' on seventy-six."

"And you're risking your life every night of the year, patroling this town. Ben, what would you do if someone dumped a lot of money in your lap? A lot of money. Say twenty thousand dollars—the equivalent of your wages for twenty years."

Kellund, tensing in the blackness of the jail woodshed, could hear the old marshal's spurred boots shift position on the bullpen's stone floor.

"With twenty thousand in my jeans, I reckon I'd head back to Missouri where I come from an' retire to enjoy what few years I got left, Daws."

The following silence grew unten-

ably long. It was Ben Buxton who finally broke it by saying, "Daws, you're fixin' to make a proposition, ain't you? By thunder, *you did rob that bank!*"

Daws Ramont's laugh had a sinister, sibilant quality. "It will do no harm for me to propose a bargain, Ben. If you reject it, it's only your word against mine, in court, that I ever made it.... I'm offering you twenty thousand dollars, deposited to your bank back in Missouri or anywhere you name, if you let me walk out of here tonight and give me until daylight to get away."

A throaty exclamation escaped Ben Buxton's lips. "Then Jawn was right. I wouldn't of believed it of you, Daws—"

Ramont said quietly, "I'm completely innocent. But I *will* admit this: I was bluffing John when I told him I had witnesses to my exact departure time from Tucson. But I did not rob the Exchange. It was not my gun that killed Lansingh."

Ben Buxton demanded skeptically, "Then why are you tryin' to buy yore way out of my *juzgado?*"

Ramont laughed, a new note of confidence in him now.

"I'll tell you why. I'm trying to save my skin. I know the temper of this town. When the news breaks that my bank has closed forever, added to the weight John Kellund's word carries in Latigo, there are men in this county who would be hot-headed enough to raid this jail and string me up to the nearest telegraph pole. That's why I'm trying to buy you tonight, Ben. If twenty thousand isn't your price, then I'm lynch bait and I know it."

Kellund heard Ben Buxton head back to the bullpen door and close it, then return to the banker's cell.

"Where-at is this twenty thousand, Daws? How could you bust jail without my bein' branded as yore accomplice?"

Daws Ramont said carefully, "Let's say I pretend to be sick, sucker you inside this cell. Grab you by the throat, knock you out, get your keys and vamose. The twenty thousand is in bonds over at Wickenburg, all I have in the world. To buy your silence, Ben, I'll meet you a week from tonight at any place you name. A man in the shadow of a lynch mob wouldn't doublecross you, Ben."

JOHN KELLUND had heard enough. With infinite stealth he got to his feet and tiptoed across the jet-black woodshed and out the door. Ten minutes later he was letting himself into the parlor of the modest home where he had lived, raising Becky from a baby to womanhood.

As he had expected, he found Tom Ramont with the girl who would be his bride on the morrow, out in the kitchen tidying up for the wedding reception.

Becky Kellund's face was flushed with excitement but the gladness left her eyes as her salty old father stepped into the kitchen, eyes narrowed against the glare of lamplight.

"Dad—is anything wrong?" the girl cried anxiously, rushing to the old man's side.

A crooked grin twitched the lips under Kellund's ropey mustache. He kissed his daughter on the forehead and turned to where his deputy stood wiping soapsuds off his hands by the kitchen sink.

"Looks like I'm to be kept in harness to the very last minute of my term, Tom," Kellund said. "Got a little ride to make tonight. Want you to ride with me."

A smothered cry broke from Becky as she saw Tom Ramont's jaw harden, saw him hitch his shell belts.

"What's up, John?" Tom Ramont asked.

"Little hossback trip out into the desert," Kellund answered. He pinched Becky on the cheek. "Nothing to worry about, honey. Your man will be back before long, ready to hit the hay and rest up for the ordeal tomorrow."

Tears grew glistening on Becky's lashes. "Dad, can't you—deputize someone else? I can't bear to think of Tom—maybe getting hurt—on the eve of our wedding day—"

Tom Ramont took the girl in his arms and said gently, "You're marrying the future sheriff of the county, sweetheart. This won't be the first time, nor the last, that duty will be

comin' between the two of us. We've got to get used to it."

John Kellund was waiting out at the front gate when Tom Ramont joined him, with his stetson and jumper on. They fell in step cutting across the courthouse square toward the jail.

"What's up, John?" young Ramont asked.

"Break in the bank robbery case," Kellund said enigmatically. "Even if my other deputy hadn't been killed, I'd of had to choose you to back my play tonight. Reckon in another hour or so you'll understand better."

CHAPTER 5 Kelly's Canyon

NOT UNTIL they had reached the waiting horses behind the blacksmith shop did Tom Ramont realize they were not heading for the jail stable. Curiosity was consuming the young deputy, but he knew old John too well to press him for further details.

They had waited less than ten minutes when the back door of the jail opened and a shadowy figure hurried out, vanishing at once into the archway of the barn.

"Who's that?" Ramont whispered. "It wasn't old Ben—"

Kellund replied with his lips close to Ramont's ear, "Ben's locked up in one of the cells. That jail-breaker's the hombre who robbed the Cattlemen's Exchange."

Tom Ramont's hand jerked automatically to holster and lifted a Colt .45 out of leather. "Then what are we waitin' for—"

Kellund drew his young deputy deeper into the shadows.

"Givin' him time to saddle a getaway hoss. He's leadin' us to wherever he stashed that sack of loot, Tom. Catch him red-handed, we've saved this country from goin' bankrupt."

Tom Ramont released a pent-up breath. "If my father knew this," he breathed, "he'd be the happiest man on earth—"

Both lawmen shrank deeper into the blackness behind the blacksmith shop as they saw the jail-breaker emerge from the county stable, leading a saddled horse. They heard the creak of leather as the fugitive mounted; a moment later they saw the anonymous shape of horse and rider pass between them and a lighted shack window in the background, heading toward the rimming desert sand hills which bordered Latigo on the south.

"We wait two minutes," John Kellund said, "and then we pick up his trail. Moon's due to rise in forty minutes. He'll leave a plain track in the dunes. Got to let him get out of sight before we start tailin' him."

John Kellund slipped away from the waiting horses then, ducking across the alley and stepping into the open door of the cellblock. Approaching Daws Ramont's cell, he fished a match from his hatband and struck it.

Old Ben Buxton was stretched out on Ramont's cot, shaping himself a cigarette.

"You all right, Ben?" Kellund asked, blowing out the match.

"No difficulties," the night marshal answered. "He was sore when he found out I wasn't toting a gun, but I told him you'd locked the gun cabinet an' I'd misplaced my key. He knows I ain't in a habit of packin' a hogleg on my rounds, anyhow. That's my life insurance."

Ben Buxton was on his feet now, gripping the iron latticework of the cell door. "He made off with my keys, after lockin' me up," the marshal said. "Get me out of here. I'm ridin' with you."

Kellund was already on his way out the back door. "You roost here, take it easy for the wedding tomorrow, old timer. I just came back to make sure Ramont hadn't roughed you up to make it look convincing."

"I had a derringer in my pocket to make sure he wouldn't, Jawn."

TWO MINUTES later Kellund and deputy Tom Ramont were in saddle, following the side street toward Latigo's outskirts.

They rode at a walk, crossing the railroad tracks and losing themselves almost at once in the towering sand hills which encroached on the south limits of the cowtown.

Dismounting, John Kellund studied the soft sand between two ridges by

starlight, and saw what he had expected to find. The tracks of the fugitive's horse, making for this break in the ridge.

"We wait here," the sheriff whispered, "until the moon gives us light enough to track by. Half hour head start means we'll be a mile back of that rider. We won't crowd our horses. He wouldn't, not in this soft ground."

Tom Ramont smothered an oath. "John, how long are you going to keep me guessing? When did you clap that hombre in jail and how'd you know he was mixed up in that robbery?"

John Kellund said heavily, "Because I wanted us to be on our way, and alone, before I sprung the news, son. The man who shot Jim Lansingh to death was your father. I recognized him the same instant he cut down on me that night. I've been living with that secret for a month now. Not knowin' whether I'd ever let you know the truth."

The starlight showed the chalky paleness on Tom Ramont's cheeks. Kellund saw the banker's son brace himself, recovering from a shock as tangible as if Kellund had struck him with a club. When he spoke, it was only to ask: "You're sure, John?"

"Dead sure, Tom. He offered Ben twenty thousand to let him out of jail tonight. Otherwise I could never have proved my case."

After a long moment Tom Ramont straightened himself in saddle. Kellund said gently. "Now you can ride back, if you want, Tom. I can handle this alone."

Ramont shook his head. "A man has his duty to do, no matter how the chips fall, John. I—I just hope Dad won't try to shoot his way out of this."

Kellund said, "He won't, unless he's got guns stashed with that sack of loot. If he has...then let me take care of it, Tom."

Neither man spoke again until the full moon lifted over the sandhills and laid its argentine brilliance over the surrounding malpais. The prints of hoofs leading off around the bend of the ridge flank were like words on a printed page, telling them the route Daws Ramont had taken in getaway.

Two miles into the hills they saw where Ramont had cut over the brow of a ridge, and to avoid skylining themselves they backtracked until they came to a break in the dunes and thus reached the ravine on the opposite side.

Picking up the banker's trail again, they saw that it was veering steadily to the southeast, in the general direction of the desert settlement at Apache Wells, still eight miles away.

The sand hills were giving way to patches of scab rock and higher ground now, and it was nearing midnight when they saw the plain tracks of Daws Ramont's horse enter the stony throat of a gulch.

"Kelly's Canyon," Kellund spoke for the first time in an hour. "Only water hole between here and Apache Wells." The sheriff reined up, trying to figure out his next move. This was a box-ended gulch; Daws Ramont would have entered it for two reasons only, to visit the site of his loot cache or to water his horse. The ingoing set of hoofprints were plainly visible in the moonlight; none showed coming out. Which meant that Daws Ramont had trapped himself between beetling fifty-foot rock walls.

Kellund said, "Ever been here before, son?"

Tom Ramont shook his head.

"I have," the sheriff answered, not showing his relief that his deputy was not aware that Kelly's Canyon had no other exit. "Water hole a quarter of a mile inside. Look. He may come out this way, the easier way, or he may follow through and make the stiff climb out the other end. Which end do you want to cover?"

Tom Ramont took his deep, shuddering breath before answering.

"Far end, I guess. Dad wouldn't fire, knowing it was me. If he does..." Ramont's voice faded out.

"*Bueno,*" John Kellund said. "On your way, then. Keep well back from the rimrock. Like I said, he was unarmed when he left the jail, I checked on that. If I hear shooting, I'll join you."

Tom Ramont moved his horse away, skirting the sheer drop of Kelly's Canyon, and vanished over the skyline. When he was gone, Kellund

spurred his mount into a nearby rincon and ground-hitched the claybank gelding.

He was thinking, "Daws will have guns waiting for him. Otherwise he'd of broken into the cabinet in my office..."

Entering the rock-walled maw of Kelly's Canyon, John Kellund hunkered down on his Justins and, to pass time while he kept an eye on the rock-carpeted trail, twisted himself a cigarette which he would not smoke.

A devil of a way to wind up twenty years behind the star, he mused, waiting to spring a trap on the man who was my best friend during all those years. Whatever happened when Daws Ramont emerged around the corner of that gulch trail ahead, John Kellund knew he would ride back to Latigo with his conscience free of the unbearable burden of guilt he had carried for the past four weeks.

He would carry the scars of this experience to the grave, but he would always be able to remember that keeping the Cattlemen's Exchange open would save a hundred friends and neighbors from ruin. More important than all, Tom Ramont had been game to see this through.

Or would he? Maybe Tom would find that the debt of loyalty he owed an outlaw father outweighed his oath of office. There was nothing to prevent Tom Ramont from skirting the rimrock until he caught sight of Daws, and giving the warning...

"It is a gamble," the old sheriff whispered, "that has to be made. For Becky's sake, if not Tom's..."

CHAPTER 6 Second Time

HE WAS REVOLVING that thought around in his head when his ears caught the crunch of iron-shod hoofs on rubble and he was lifting his scarred old Army .44 from holster when Daws Ramont came in sight around the near bend of the gulch.

A bulging gunnysack was lashed to the banker's saddle pommel. And he had had something else cached here in this waterhole canyon in the middle of the desert. A Winchester, which he was carrying with the walnut stock resting beside the saddle horn, the moon's rays putting a fluid glinting on the blued octagonal barrel.

John Kellund came to his feet, knowing it was but a question of seconds before Daws Ramont caught sight of his shadow against the eroded wall of rock behind him.

It was Ramont's horse who caught the man-scent at the canyon mouth and betrayed that discovery to its rider by a sudden recoiling sideward motion on the trail.

"Throw down the carbeen, Daws," John Kellund spoke distinctly through the night. "You're boxed in here, between Tom an' me."

Daws Ramont pulled the horse to a halt, his heavy shape straightening in the saddle. The banker spoke in a breathy monotone, "Then Buxton knew what he was doing, letting me go on a promise of money he knew I would never deliver—"

Kellund said, "Throw down the carbeen, Daws. And keep both hands in sight."

Ramont tossed the Winchester aside. He swung down from stirrups, moving away from the horse, both arms at hatbrim height.

"John," the outlaw's voice showed its first sign of breaking, "you didn't fetch Tom along tonight, did you?"

Kellund shrugged. "You shot the only other deputy I had, Daws... Come this way, now."

Ramont started forward. His boot struck a protruding stone in the path and he pitched headlong, and in picking himself up his right hand made its innocent-looking reach under the lapel of his black frock coat and at point-blank range John Kellund saw the glint of metal as Ramont pulled his hide-out pistol.

The crashing thunder of the Army revolver in the sheriff's hand blotted out the sharper explosion of the banker's weapon. A bullet made its air-whip alongside the sheriff's head and ricocheted in a shower of stone chips from the rimrock overhead.

John Kellund had his own Colt back in holster before Daws Ramont's knees buckled and he crumpled soundlessly on the rocks.

Even at seventy, and in this tricky half-light, John Kellund could place his shots where he wanted them, give or take half an inch. In this kill or die situation, his target had been the white bridge of Ramont's nose. This time he hadn't missed.

Staring down at the motionless shape before him, Kellund felt the inevitable soul-sickness wash over him, the soul-sickness he invariably felt whenever duty forced him to take a human life.

That was an inescapable part of wearing a law star, as Tom Ramont would find out sooner or later. The important thing was to hang onto one's sense of values and wear the star honorably, never permitting it to tarnish.

For Kellund, all this would be soon over, was already over. Out on the river homestead, spending his days hunting and fishing and later on maybe daddling a grandchild on his knee, Kellund would be able to forget the odor of blood and gunsmoke for all time to come....

ANOTHER dawn was pooling its layers of red light over Latigo's sprawled buildings when the two lawmen emerged from the southern end of the desert and crossed the railroad tracks, leading a horse with a dead man roped across its saddle.

The red light on the spire of the church where Tom and Becky would be getting married in a few hours reminded John Kellund of a finger pointing toward God.

No one was abroad at this early hour to see them enter the corral behind the Latigo jail.

John Kellund swung stiffly from stirrups and untied the sack of bank loot from his pommel. To the somber-faced young deputy he said, "Attend to the horses, Tom, and I'll stow this in my office safe until the bank authorities show up from Phoenix. Then maybe you better get over to the house and set Becky's heart at rest."

He got Tom Ramont's nod as he slung the gunnysack over his shoulder and headed toward the rear door of the cellblock, knowing Ben Buxton had seen them ride in.

Climbing the steps, he saw the old night marshal waiting inside the locked cell. Across Main Street came the notes of the bank clock chiming the hour of five. Here to the very end, the routine never varied, these two old law dogs meeting at this precise hour every morning. He would miss the old habits, out on the homestead, but not too much.

"Quiet night, Ben?" Sheriff Kellund asked, inserting a key into the cell lock.

Ben Buxton shrugged. "Tol'able," he said. ●END

THE MORNING STAR SACRIFICE

by W. K. PUTNEY

In order to insure fertile lands and bring forth good crops, that ancient branch of the Pawnee Indians known as the Skidis, sacrificed an Indian maiden. This was commonly a captive taken from a hostile tribe either by abduction or in warfare.

The maiden was bound while certain rites were performed. Then she was slain and her body torn into small pieces. The pieces were buried in the fields where grain was to be raised. It was believed that her flesh would cause a magical growth of the grain and bountiful crops would result.

This practice was ended in the early part of the nineteenth century when a Tshawhi warrior by the name of Petaleshara boldly rescued a Comanche maiden, set her on a horse and led her back to her own people. His act was influenced by the white people who had migrated to that region.

THE RIGHT ROAD

by RAY GAULDEN

Frank Lane had a tough time convincing Doyle to stay on in this town.

A man got used to a way of living, and though the right woman might make him see things different for a while, Frank Lane was convinced that once a drifter, always a drifter . . . . .

FOR THE past month, Frank Lane had watched unrest building in Doyle Morgan, the way it always did when he'd seen enough of a town and wanted to push on. And for the first time since they'd been knocking around together, Frank wasn't ready to leave. He liked this Colorado high country and he wanted to stay a while.

Riding toward town that Saturday afternoon, Frank was aware of the discontent in his partner's dark eyes. They were the same age, he thought. Twenty-seven. And they both liked the same things—whiskey, brawls, and women.

"Well there's your town of Bellville," Doyle said, looking at the buildings up ahead. "A two-bit burg if I ever saw one."

Frank grinned at him. "Tell me what Kansas City had that you can't find right here?"

"I could put in the rest of the day naming them off," Doyle said, making a wry face. "For one thing, the beer was colder." He shook his head. "I guess they never heard of ice in Bellville."

"We've got a job here," Frank said. "That's something we didn't have in K. C."

"I wouldn't call pounding a saddle from sunup till dark much of a job."

"Maybe not, but with work as scarce as it is right now, I figure we're lucky to be eating three times a day."

Doyle said ruefully, "Rommell knew he had us over a barrel when he hired us. Thirty a month, he says,

and I expect you boys to earn it."

"Can't see where it's hurt us, putting out some sweat for a change."

"Hasn't done me any good," Doyle said sourly. "When I bust a gut for an outfit I want more out of it than tobacco money."

Somehow, Frank hadn't given much thought to the hard work or how little they were making. He had been satisfied just getting to town once in a while. After considering it for a moment, he said, "Maybe we can get Rommell to kick through with a raise."

"Fat chance."

"Won't hurt to ask him."

"Aw, you'd just be wasting your time."

They had wasted a lot of it the last few years, Frank thought. Drifting from town to town, working a month or two and pushing on. What money they made was thrown away on a good time, and they'd laugh about it afterwards.

Heading for nowhere, they had looked around for a job, but there was only one to be had, and that was working for a man who believed in getting more than his money's worth.

It wasn't much of a town, Frank thought. Just a dozen or so frame buildings around a wide place in the road. But the people weren't bad. Kind of friendly for the most part, and there was one in particular. Her name was Lois...

WHEN THEY reached town, Doyle made a critical survey of the dusty street before his gaze settled on the general store. He spoke from the side of his mouth. "There Rommell is, the old buzzard. Sitting in the shade and taking it easy as usual."

"If I had his money," Frank said with a grin, "I'd take it easy, too."

"How much you suppose he's got in that tin box he calls a safe?"

Frank shrugged.

"Ten, maybe twenty thousand," Doyle said as if he were talking to himself. "And he's got the gall to pay us a measly thirty bucks a month."

"We can't all be big-hearted," Frank said. "Besides, maybe he'll see things different now that we've shown him we're not afraid of work."

"I wouldn't count on it."

They were quiet for a moment, and then Doyle spoke again. "Ever stop to think what it'd be like having a rich uncle die and leave you a pile of money?"

"I haven't got any rich uncle."

"Me neither, but I can see how it would be if somebody left me a saddle-bag full of dinero."

Frank could see how it would be, too. They would head for some big city and put up at the best hotel. Fancy food and dollar cigars and liquor by the case. A lot of parties and women hanging onto you as long as the money lasted. But it wouldn't last forever.

"Stop dreaming," Frank said when they reached the store. "Let's go over and hit him up for that raise."

"Better not take me along. I'm feeling just right to tell him what I think of him."

"All right, I'll talk to him by myself."

Doyle frowned. "Why don't you forget it? We can have a drink and find out if anybody knows what's doing somewhere else."

"Let's see how I make out with Rommell. I'll meet you at the saloon."

Doyle rode on down the street and Frank stared after him, wondering why he kept trying to talk Doyle out of leaving. He never had before. All Doyle ever had to do was say the word and they were off. It had been that way ever since they met during the war. Both wearing Confederate gray, they had fought together, drunk from the same bottle, shared the last tobacco in a sack.

A lot to remember, Frank thought, massaging his left arm. The arm still hurt a little sometimes, but he was lucky he hadn't lost it, according to the Army doctor. He would have if Doyle hadn't crawled out there that day and carried him back.

They had been close after that, partners...

Frank started to pull over to the rack in front of the store, then changed his course when he saw Lois Betcher come out of the cafe on the opposite side of the street. She was about to turn up the walk, but at

sight of him she stopped and waited while he dismounted.

"Hello, Lois," he said, removing his Stetson.

"Hello, Frank."

She was a small girl with dark hair and eyes and she was smiling as she looked at him, a soft curving of her lips that caused an odd disturbance in him. He had never known this kind of woman before.

"How have you been, Lois?"

"Fine, and you?"

"Making out all right," he said, wondering about the plain housedress and apron she was wearing.

"I'm a working girl," she told him as though she had read the question in his eyes. "I've just finished my shift for today."

Frank glanced at the cafe. "You mean you're—"

"Waiting on tables," she said, still smiling. "I've been doing it for two weeks now."

He had been under the impression that she didn't have to work. There was that house she lived in. It had cost money to build a place like that. Fine furniture and things to make you think she was well off.

"I didn't know how things were, Lois."

Her smile was dim now, almost gone. "I'm afraid I haven't been very honest with you, Frank. I've let you believe that my father left me well fixed, but he didn't. The truth is that he was heavily in debt when he died."

"But that house?"

"Dad built it when he was making money, before his business went to pieces. Now the bank over at the county seat owns the house, and I'm staying there until they find a buyer."

Her face was serious, and then she caught herself as though she realized she had said too much. Her smile came back, full and warm. "The work isn't hard," she said. "I'm enjoying it."

"Thought I might stop by after a while," he said.

"I was hoping you would." Her eyes, holding to his, stirred a yearning in him and at the same time made him uneasy.

SHE WAS gone then and he watched her walk up the street, liking the way she carried herself with her shoulders back and her head high. She had always had it easy, he thought, used to the best of everything. Must have been hard for a girl like that to take a job waiting tables. But she had and he admired her more than ever.

She hadn't been out of his mind long since the day he and Doyle rode in here and stopped by the Betcher house for a drink of water. She was out in the yard, tending her flowers, and there was something in the way she looked at him that he kept thinking about. She hadn't looked at Doyle right off. That grin of his seemed to get them, and he had turned it on for Lois that day but she acted as if she didn't know he was around.

When Lois was out of sight, Frank left his horse at a rack and started across the street. Jess Rommell, the man they worked for, was still sitting in his easy chair, sipping a glass of something cool-looking. He was too big around the middle, but the flesh on his square face was firm and still stained from sun although he was now a town man.

"Howdy, Mr. Rommell," Frank said as he stepped upon the porch.

Rommell nodded and glanced toward the saloon. "That partner of yours acted like he was in a rush to get a drink."

Frank leaned against a porch post and reached for his tobacco sack. "After going a whole month without it," he said, "a man can work up an awful thirst."

A pitcher of lemonade was sitting on an applebox beside Rommell's chair. He looked at it and said, "I stick to fruit juice. It's cheaper than whiskey and a heap better for your belly."

Frank licked the flap on his smoke and smiled. "Man can't get no kick out of it, though."

"I figure it's all in your head," Rommell said, reaching for his pipe, talking while he tamped tobacco into it. "Reckon I've had about as much fun as anybody in my time, and I never had to get boozed up to do it."

Rommell seldom wore a hat. His

hair was white, and it hung on his forehead, almost as if he had bangs, Frank thought. There was a barber shop down the street, but Rommell said his wife had been cutting his hair ever since they were married and he saw no reason for her to stop now.

If I was as well fixed as he is, Frank thought, I'd hire me a barber full-time. And then the sobering thought came to him that maybe it was because Rommell was careful with his money that he had been able to build a ranch and later buy this store. He wasn't old, only about fifty, and he owned a nice house on the edge of town. An important man in Bellville, a man who liked to sit in the shade and let somebody else do his work for him.

"Not that I see anything wrong with taking a drink," Rommell was saying. "Maybe some men need the stuff and if they've got brains enough to know when to stop, I reckon it's all right."

HE WENT on, telling about a man he had once known and Frank smoked, finding no interest in the talk. All he wanted was to ask him about the raise and get it over with. More money, he thought, was the only thing that might get Doyle to stop nagging him about leaving.

From where he was standing he could see into the store and he watched the clerk moving around behind the counter. There were no customers, but the clerk, a thin, sad-faced man, was trying to keep busy, and every now and then he glanced at the door as if he were afraid Rommell might be watching him.

Frank swore under his breath, thinking that the clerk was like a lot of other men who worked for a living. Scared of losing his job; afraid to stop long enough to take a good long breath. It was something Doyle was always bringing up, saying how most men got themselves in a rut and stayed there because they didn't have the guts to do anything about it.

Looking at the clerk, Frank decided that Doyle was right.

Rommell stopped talking for a moment and puffed on his pipe. Then he asked, "You got something on your mind?"

"As a matter of fact, I have," Frank said with a dim smile. "Was wondering what chances we'd have of getting a little more money."

"More money?" Rommell took his feet off the railing.

"Thirty a month's not much," Frank said. "Besides, you've got a short crew and it keeps two riders humping."

"That's what I had to do when I was your age," Rommell said, scowling. "Used to come in dragging every night, and for no more than you're making. Grub was bad and the ramrod was a son-of-a-gun to get along with. He rode me plenty, but I stuck it out.'"

Frank said stubbornly, "Figure we're worth more than thirty a month."

Rommel continued as though he hadn't heard. "Nobody made me a present of that ranch out there. My old daddy never left me a thing. Started from scratch, I did, worked and skimped, and went without a lot."

It was like Doyle had said, Frank thought. He was just wasting his time, fooling around here when he could be having a drink.

"What I've got wasn't dumped in my lap," Rommell went on. "I shed plenty of sweat and my missus did the same. Took me a long time to get where I am, but now I figure I've earned the right to set back and let somebody else do the hard part."

"Just thought I'd ask," Frank said.

When he started to leave, Rommell said, "See me in six months, and maybe we can talk about a raise then."

Frank left the porch without answering. Six months from now, he thought, he and Doyle would be a long way from this range. It had been hard enough holding Doyle down this long, and now that there was no hope of better pay, Frank told himself that maybe Doyle was right. They wouldn't get anywhere working for Jess Rommell.

HE GOT his horse and rode down the street, wondering why in spite of the way things stacked up he

half-way wanted to stay. For the first time during the three months they'd been here, he admitted it was Lois that was holding him. He had been telling himself it was just that he was tired of drifting and wanted to find out what it was like settling down for a change.

But it was Lois who had made him see things different, and thinking about it now he realized he hadn't stopped long enough to consider what was ahead for them. Just being around her and thinking about her had been enough until now, but it couldn't go on forever that way. And it was too much to expect a girl like Lois to get serious with a thirty a month saddle-tramp.

In front of the saloon, Frank stopped and was wrapping his reins around the rack when he saw Sam Cady. The marshal had been standing under the wooden awning, but now he moved out into the sunlight.

"Howdy," Cady said.

Frank nodded, thinking that the marshal was a likable man. Too old, some said, claiming that a man close to seventy ought to retire. But there was no slope to Cady's shoulders and if his hands weren't steady, Frank couldn't tell it.

"How's the job going?" Cady asked.

"I've had better—ones with more pay and less work."

With a glance at the store, Cady said, "Jess don't believe in starting his help out too high."

"You can say that again," Frank said as he ducked under the rack. "I hit him up for a raise, but I might as well have asked for a half interest in the spread."

"It ain't that Jess is tight-fisted."

"No," Frank said dryly. "Nothing like that."

Cady's face remained sober. "It's just that Jess made his the hard way and he figures everybody else ought to do the same. He's a fair man, though. Waberley, his foreman, has been with him a long time. Making good money now."

Frank glanced toward the saloon, knowing that Doyle was waiting for him inside.

"I was just talking to Waberley last week," Cady said, pulling out his pocket knife. "Told me it wouldn't be long till he had enough saved to buy that little outfit he's had his eye on."

Frank smiled, knowing what the marshal was getting at. "And you figure if I stay put maybe I'll wind up with Waberley's job?"

"It's something to think about."

"Right now I'm thinking about a beer."

"You only been here three months." Cady said, starting to work on his fingernails with the knife. "You boys drifted in here and Jess took a chance on you. Sure, he hired you cheap and he's worked you hard, but you stick with him and I can tell you it'll pay off."

Frank looked at the sign on the front of the saloon, telling himself a man needed more of a promise than that to stick on a job for six months or a year. He started away from the rack, saying, "Don't want Doyle to drink the place dry. See you around, Marshal."

Cady had the clearest, sharpest blue eyes that Frank had ever seen and he could feel them on his back as he walked toward the slatted doors. He went inside and the smell of the place was in his nose. Beer and sawdust and tobacco smoke. Men talking, laughing, swearing now and then. Quieter than some he'd been in, but it was still a saloon and he wondered if he and Doyle had a dollar for every hour they'd spent in one how much money they'd have now. Plenty, he thought. Enough that they wouldn't have to be working for a man like Jess Rommell.

DOYLE MORGAN was standing at one end of the bar with a boot on the rail and a beer glass in front of him. "I take it," he said when Frank came up, "that you didn't have any luck with the boss?"

"He told me to come back in six months and talk to him."

Doyle laughed without humor. "I can just see myself staying that long."

Frank ordered a beer and sipped it slowly while Doyle drained his glass and called for another drink. When the man in the white apron took his

time, Doyle hit the bar with his fist.

"Anything wrong with my money?" he demanded.

"I'm coming," the bartender growled. "Keep your shirt on."

Doyle glared at him, and Frank, watching his partner, knew how it was. They had gone three months without getting on a good drunk and ending up in a brawl. Doyle was in the right frame of mind for it now, but Frank wasn't. Somehow the old recklessness was missing.

"Let's take this place apart," Doyle said with a tight grin. "Let's show these penny-ante cardplayers what a two-man wrecking crew can do."

He'd never had to talk Frank into it before. What difference did it make if you didn't know what you were fighting for. You did it because you liked it, for the fun of fighting, and a chance to let off steam.

"Settle down and drink your beer," Frank said quietly. "I'm not in the mood to get all bloodied up."

Doyle stopped glaring at the bartender and put a puzzled stare on Frank. "What's the matter with you, anyway?"

"Nothing. I just can't see getting my head busted for no reason."

"So now you've got to have a reason?" Doyle shook his head. "I've been worrying about you ever since we hit this burg, but I thought whatever was eating on you would pass. But instead of snapping out of it, you're getting worse all the time."

Frank took another sip of beer. "I don't know what's wrong with me."

Doyle studied him for a moment. "I can tell you what it is. You've been messing around that gal too much, letting her put a lot of fool notions in your head."

Frank looked at his beer glass and said nothing.

"I figured you'd have a little fun with her and let it go at that," Doyle said. "But it's got worse all the time, till now you're acting like getting tied up in her apron strings might be just what you want."

"Would it be so bad?"

"You're asking me and I'll tell you. There's some men can take it and some that can't. You and me aren't the kind that's ever gonna be satisfied hanging our hat in the same place from now till kingdom come. We're just not built that way, so what's the sense kidding yourself."

"You think that's what I've been doing, huh?"

DOYLE nodded. "You've been listening to all that hightoned lady talk till you don't know which end's up. But that gal you're pining for is the kind that wants to get married, raise a batch of kids, and drag a man off to church every Sunday, and she's not going to settle for any thirty a month cowhand."

"I guess you're right about that part of it."

"I'm right about all of it, Frank. So shake the perfume out of your head and forget her. We'll go down and tell old Rommell what he can do with his job and kiss this burg goodbye." Doyle was smiling now and he slapped Frank on the arm. "What do you say?"

"I don't know," Frank said. "Where you want to go?"

"Plenty of places we haven't seen yet. Just heard a fellow talking in here a little while ago, said things were booming in Denver. Always kind of wanted to see the Cherry Creek country. Wouldn't take us long to go back to the ranch and pack our warbags. We could leave tonight."

"No sense putting it off, I guess," Frank said, but he was remembering he had told Lois he would see her. "Find yourself a poker game and I'll be back in a little bit."

Doyle Morgan looked as though he was going to say something else, but he let it pass and turned back to the bar. When Frank reached the door, he glanced over his shoulder. Doyle was staring into his glass and he wasn't smiling now.

On his way to the Betcher house, Frank saw Sam Cady standing in front of the cafe, and he knew the old man was watching him. Kind of like he's waiting, Frank thought, to see which way I'll turn.

He rode on, realizing Doyle had said things back there in the saloon that made sense. Maybe Doyle knew him better than he knew himself. Could he change even if he wanted

to? A man got used to a way of living, and though a woman might make him see things different for a while, could she do it forever?

Sure, he liked it here and there was that piece of ground in the hills that he had been looking at, but how could a man save enough on a riding job to start his own outfit? It couldn't be done and he knew it. Maybe if he left with Doyle and they went to some of the mining towns like Leadville they could find work that would pay better than punching cows. Might make a stake in a year or so, and then he could buy that outfit.

The thing that bothered him most was that he didn't know for sure what he wanted. Back there in the saloon, listening to Doyle talk about going to Denver, he had gotten a little carried away with the idea. A lot of things to see and a lot to do in a city like that. Why, he'd heard there were horse-drawn street cars to carry you around...

When he thought of Lois those things didn't seem to mean much, but how would he feel after he'd been around her a while and the newness was gone? And what about when it came to splitting up with Doyle? He didn't like to think about cutting loose from the best friend he'd ever had. And that was what it would mean because Doyle Morgan had decided to leave and there would be no holding him back now.

FRANK'S mind was still troubled when he came to the Betcher house. He stopped and sat his saddle for a moment, looking at the house and wondering if it would be better to pull out without seeing her. So blamed easy to get lost in those eyes of hers. But he knew he couldn't leave without saying goodbye. Do it, he thought, and have it over with.

When he reached the front porch, Lois came out of the house and smiled at him. She had changed from the plain housedress to one that did more for her. It was dark blue with puffed sleeves and a full skirt.

"I was watching for you," she said.

Frank held his hat in his hand and turned it slowly.

"Shall we sit in the swing?" she asked.

He nodded and followed her to the end of the long porch and they sat down, not too close together for there were neighbors across the street and it was not yet dark.

For a time Frank faced the mountains, thinking and saying nothing. Then he spoke without looking at her. "Doyle's got it in his head to pull stakes."

"Oh," Lois said in a small voice.

He turned toward her, but she kept her eyes averted and he was unable to read her expression.

"And where Doyle goes, you go," she said quietly.

"It's been that way for a long time," Frank said, looking back at the mountains.

The sun was gone now and shadows had begun their march. Frank could see the range stretching away beyond town, a land of high grass turning somber with evening.

"Man can't make any money here," he said. "Hardly enough to get by on."

"Money means a lot, doesn't it?"

"Does when you haven't got it."

"I thought it was something I'd never have to worry about," Lois said. "My folks were too good to me. Father spoiled me, let me have anything I wanted. There was always a hired girl to do the housework and the cooking, and it never occurred to me that it wouldn't always be that way."

His eyes were on her face, watching the play of emotion.

"For a while after father died, it was hard for me to realize that he had lost everything. I didn't know until the bank told me. Everybody felt sorry for me and I felt sorry for myself." She smiled faintly. "I thought that I was too good to be a waitress or do sewing or work in a store. So, I lived on the credit Jess Rommell gave me."

"Didn't suppose Rommell would give anybody credit."

"He's not as bad as you think. He's been good to me and I took advantage of him until I finally realized that I couldn't go on forever letting

other people worry about my problems."

Frank sat there looking at her, knowing after the way she had turned out that she couldn't have been too bad to start with.

"I'm not making big money," she said. "But at least I'm earning my own way."

THEY WERE quiet for a while and the shadows were getting longer, but he wasn't aware of them. He looked at her, thinking that he had only kissed her once, and wanting to kiss her now, but telling himself that if he did it might cause him to make the wrong decision.

"I could go away for a while," he said. "Make a stake and then come back."

Her eyes were on the house across the street. "If you leave with Doyle," she said, "you'll never come back."

She was right and he knew it and her words made him ill-at-ease. He said, "You deserve something better than a down-at-the-heels drifter."

"A man can make something of himself if he sets his mind to it."

He considered that for a moment, and then said, "Not easy to get a start."

"A man and a woman can work it out if they want to. She can take a job and help him. The two of them could save enough for a start."

It sounded good and he knew he'd never find a better woman than Lois, but he remembered the way it had been with him and Doyle. They were two of a kind and the ties between them were strong.

He stood up, not looking at her as he said, "Doyle's waiting for me."

She sat with her hands folded in her lap and she didn't answer. When he reached the gate, he glanced back and saw that she had gotten up and was standing there in the shadows, motionless. He wanted to tell her he'd be back, but he didn't know whether he would or not.

It was dark by the time he reached the main part of town. Lamps had been lighted inside the saloon and he stopped there, leaving his horse at the rack. As he was crossing the porch, he saw Sam Cady leaning against the front of the building.

"If you're looking for that partner of yours," Cady said, "you won't find him in there."

"Gone to the cafe?" Frank asked.

Cady shook his head. "No, he pulled out. Said to tell you he was heading for Denver, that he wouldn't be riding fast in case you wanted to catch up with him."

"Why did he do a thing like that?" Frank asked, looking off into the darkness. "I told him I wouldn't be gone long."

"Maybe he saw the way things were shaping up and figured it would take more than talk to get you out of this town."

That was it, Frank thought. Doyle was afraid that when I came back from seeing Lois I might not want to go with him. He figured working it this way would do more to get me to come along than anything he could say.

"There's two roads to travel," Cady said. "One of them is smooth and easy riding, but it don't lead nowhere. The other trail is rougher, but it will take a fellow in the right direction."

Frank went back to his horse, lifting a hand to Cady as he rode into the darkness. Doyle, he knew would be heading south and he'd make out wherever he went.

Frank turned in the other direction, smiling as he rode toward the Betcher house. She'd be waiting, he thought, and knew he was taking the right road. ●END

DID YOU KNOW THAT the only Western magazine selected for inclusion in the famous Time Capsule (built to last 5,000 years) was *COMPLETE WESTERN BOOK MAGAZINE*....

THE MAN ON THE WHITE HORSE

by HAROLD HELFER

ONE OF THE strangest and least-known sagas in American history concerns an event that never occurred, but it's very much worth telling about anyway. Its "hero" was one of the most swashbuckling characters ever to stride across the American scene, Sam Houston, and it grew out of a grandiose scheme of his that would have changed history.

The whole affair came to a head a little more than 100 years ago, at the time when the bitter feeling between the North and the South was reaching its climax, and the strapping raven-haired Sam Houston was Governor of Texas.

With 2,000 percussion rifles, 1,000 Sharp rifles, and 3,000 six-shooters, Sam Houston figured that he and the Texas Rangers could change the course of history . . . . .

Sam Houston had conceived an idea which he believed would achieve three things: Make Texas even greater than it was, preserve the Union, and insure Sam Houston's becoming one of the most memorable names in American history.

The plan was a simple one: Houston would lead an expedition into Mexico with the idea of conquering it. It would not only mean more territory for Texas and the United States but the resulting war would unite the country, thrusting into the background the enveloping sectional acrimony. And, as the dashing "man on the white horse" who had brought this all about, the Texas governor would be acclaimed as a great national hero around whom the whole country could rally, and he'd be swept inevitably right into the White House.

With the self-driving determination that was his outstanding characteristic, Sam Houston set out to bring this about. First, he attempted to persuade the Secretary of War in Washington to send him 2000 percussion rifles, 1000 Sharp rifles, 3000 revolvers and 1000 cavalry accoutrements—ostensibly to "strengthen" his Texas Rangers for more effective border patrol duty. Actually, of course, it was to build up his Rangers into an expeditionary force of some 5000 men to take on Mexico.

When Secretary of War Floyd turned down his request for arms, the fiery Texas leader was far from finished. He turned his attention to the Department of Interior. He offered to the Department this suggestion: That all the Indians in the country be sent to Texas and placed on one big reservation, with the State supervising it.

Houston's purpose was two-fold: If Texas had to handle the nation's Indians, she'd have to be supplied with a larger militia—and so, willy-nilly, Sam would have his Mexican expeditionary force, after all. Moreover, from the Indians the Texas Governor felt he'd be able to recruit some good fighting men for his army.

A REALIST as well as a dreamer, though, Houston wasn't kidding himself about the tough task that lay ahead in attempting to take over Mexico. From personal experience that dated back before the Alamo, the lean-visaged, handsome adventurer knew that the Mexicans fought like devils when aroused and that it would take a rather large and determined force to overcome them. He not only figured to pick up a passel of Indian braves for his outfit, but hoped that Juan Cortinas, a rebel Mexican leader, would throw in his lot with him.

But, here again, the Federal Gov-

(*please turn to page* 36)

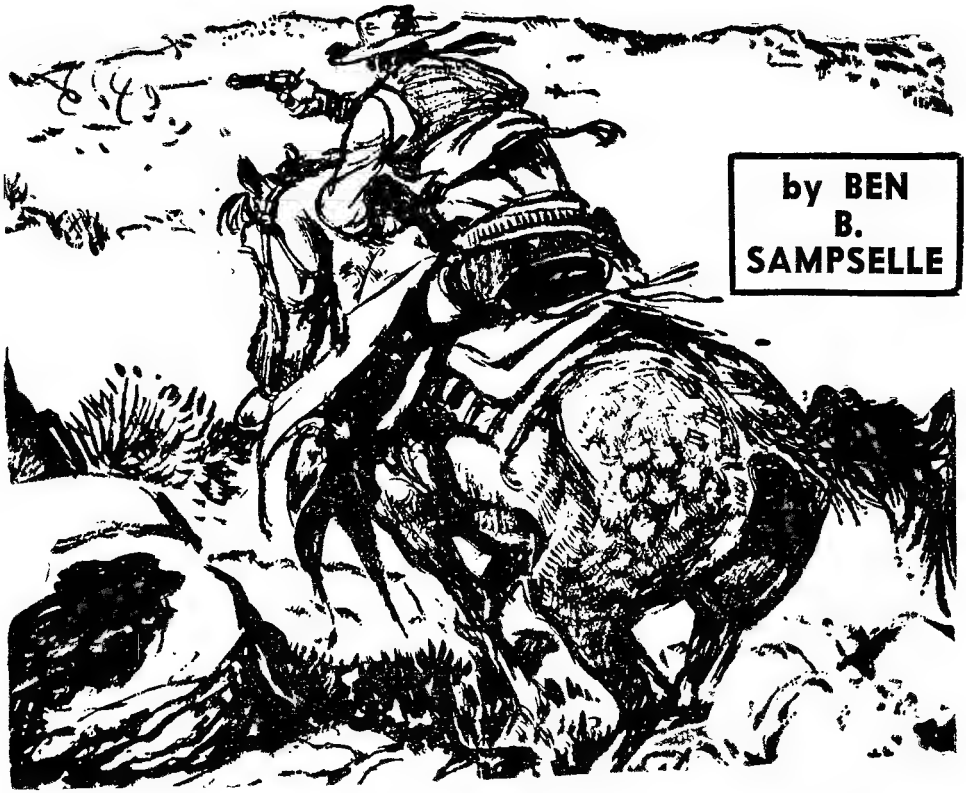
He whirled on me, "You must be the traitor the Old Man's been talking about."

THE FLYING K was down to bedrock, and the futility of fighting back inched over us as implacably as the evening shadows of the Bighorns marched toward the Powder River.

Rustlers, Canady's Hole-in-the-Wall bunch, were stripping us as clean as the bore of a mountainman's rifle. The more "Hardwinter" Daniels, the owner of the dwindling spread planned to checkmate Canady's gang, the worse we fared. And, there wasn't a man that wore boot leather more deserving of a better deal than Hardwinter.

Long purple shadows were in the draws as we rode in from another useless chase, tired, dust-grimed, and saddle-weary. My legs were full of pins and needles as I slid out of saddle. I glanced at the tall, gaunt Hardwinter to see how he was taking it. He looked less jaded than any of his six riders, though he had been driving himself without stint.

"Turn your horses into the pasture," Hardwinter said. "We'll gath-



by BEN B. SAMPSELLE

KILLER IN THE CREW

A Powder River rider never took off his gun belt except when he hit the sack, yet whoever insisted on keeping his six-shooter now branded himself bushwhacker . . . . . .

er fresh ones and ride again after supper."

Fred Tremont, a tall and wiry rider, swayed tiredly on his long spraddled legs and stared at the Old Man. "Look, Hardwinter, you know by now it's a losing game. Canady's bunch are a couple too many for us. You've got only one small herd left—the one at the mouth of Buffalo Creek Canyon. We could gather them tomorrow and move down on the grass closer to Cheyenne."

I knew, as did every other member of the crew, that Tremont was right. I hardly expected the Old Man to fall in with the idea, however. He wasn't set up that way. He shook his head. "I've given my best to keep the spread on its feet." His spare shoulders lifted in a bleak shrug. "I'm too old to run, and too old to start over again." He dismissed it with a flick of his rope-burned hand. "I left the herd at the mouth of the canyon for a purpose. Canady will be after them tonight. He'll bring his gang through the canyon rather than the long way 'round. If we can trap Canady and turn him over to the sheriff, his gang will scatter."

It was at the end of a silent, morose supper of cold beef and beans, that Hardwinter gave us an inkling that something way to hellangone out of the ordinary was on his mind. "Come over to the office," he said, as he

pushed up from the table, his spare frame a gaunt silhouette against the dim light from the coal oil lamp on the wall.

The mere words conveyed no hint that something big was brewing. It was the flatness of his leathery cheeks and the iciness of his gray eyes under their shaggy, snow-tipped brows that telegraphed the message. It jerked every man of the crew up straight. It hit me like a cold wind on my spine.

I ambled along behind the others toward the office, letting my mind and eyes run free. Cloud Peak was a stark needle point against the soft spring sky, lighted a faint lilac by the promise of a moon over the horizon. A stillness hung over the meadows, disturbed only by the low mooing of a springer cow for her calf. The pungent fragrance of sage and bee balm drifted in on the night breeze. This seemed a peaceful land where there should have been no rustling, bloodshed and violent death in the shadows.

WHEN I REACHED the office, Hardwinter was standing with his back to the far wall. The room's meager furnishings—an old roll-top desk, a small table, and two chairs, resembled Hardwinter. They were old and battered by long and hard usage.

The crew was standing in a loose semi-circle, facing the Old Man, spraddle-legged to keep from weaving, thumbs hooked behind their gun belts. A month ago there had been nine of us, but Jones, Hardee, and Tipton were sleeping tonight in the small grove of aspens beyond the horse pasture.

"Come in, Baker," Hardwinter said to me, as his eyes moved searchingly over our faces.

Stepping between the two riders nearest me put Preacher Karns on my right, a tall, cadaverous man, whose pious face and short preachments had caused his nickname. Karns, a hard worker, kept mostly to himself when not in the saddle.

The wiry, impatient Tremont was on my left. Tremont, swift and deadly with a six-gun, had come to the Flying K a short while before the rustlers started making life miserable for Hardwinter—his riders, too.

Beyond Tremont was Joe Bean. Tall, gangling, and shy, Joe wasn't a day over sixteen. He seemed to be all feet, arms, and eyes. Anyone could tell by the way his eyes kept on Hardwinter that he thought the Old Man was ace high. Shorty McCabe, a squat, jovial Irishman, who took the worst with a shrug of dismissal, stood at Joe's elbow.

Next to McCabe, Dude Marland swayed gently on the balls of his feet. Dude's clothes had taken a beating, but they still looked good beside the patched and faded shirts and pants of the rest of us. Dude was strong for the ladies when he got to town, and the feeling was usually mutual.

"We've been outguessed at every turn," Hardwinter said, the line of his jaw grim under its heavy stubble of beard. "Once, twice, even three times Canady's gang might do this, but not day after day could he—" The Old Man stopped abruptly, and let the situation hang for an explosive moment. No one spoke, and no one took his eyes off Hardwinter. We were trying to run ahead of his words, trying to read his thoughts.

Tremont broke the strained silence. "You think Canady's spying on us from the ridge? Seeing which way we—?"

"Canady doesn't have to spy on us from anywhere," the Old Man said, a sandy grittiness in his voice, his gray eyes as bleak as creek ice. Then he threw a bombshell among us. "There's a traitor in the crew."

A sudden heavy silence beat against my eardrums. We stared at Hardwinter, but I don't think any of us really saw him. Our minds were busy with questions. A half-dozen hit me at once. Was Hardwinter guessing, or did he know there was a traitor in the crew? I felt a cold finger slide up and down my spine. Would Hardwinter name the rider?

I shifted my glance, and caught Dude Marland's eye. A swift belligerence washed the bland smoothness from his face, and his glance flicked to the Old Man. "You've said some high words, Hardwinter. Name the man."

IN MY YEAR or more with Hardwinter, I had seen him considerably riled a couple of times, and thought he might let go now. But he didn't. Other than the line of his mouth thinning, not a seam of his weatherbeaten face changed shape.

"No," he said, just the one word, short and sharp.

I guessed he would let it lie right there, and sort of hoped he would. Hardwinter wasn't an easy man to argue with. His brain was as sharp as a bear trap, and his will seemed made of the same durable material when he had set a course. He fooled me again.

"I'm going to give the traitor a chance to name himself," Hardwinter said, distaste shaping his lips.

How? This and other questions flashed through my mind. Would the rider dare to advertise himself openly to the others? They remembered with rank bitterness that Jones, Hardee, and Tipton, all likeable men, had been victims of Canady's gang. And, three times a day their stomachs reminded them that Katie, Hardwinter's wife, wasn't there to cook for them. Katie, stout and motherly, had not wanted to leave, but after seeing three men brought in, dangling across their saddles, Hardwinter had been able to persuade her to go down to Cheyenne for a spell.

I waited, holding my breath. I knew the others were doing the same thing. It was plain from their expressions what they were thinking, as they gave each other quick slantwise glances. Then, into the strained quiet, Hardwinter tossed the second bombshell.

"Take off your guns and lay them on the table."

I froze with surprise. A rider never took off his gun and belt except when he hit his bunk, and then he was careful to place the weapon where it could be reached instantly. Here, in the Powder River country, ever since Bozeman had blazed his trail from the Platte to Montana through the last stronghold of the warring Sioux, men had worn their guns as a matter of necessity no less than a coat against the winter blizzards. Nobody made a move to obey.

Hardwinter's voice ran at us levelly. "There has been too much blood spilled already. If the wolf can find the courage to ride off, I don't want him shot in the back."

"That would be exactly what the rustlers did to us," Tremont said, a hot impatience in his voice.

"We'll leave drygulching to Canady's gang," Hardwinter said, his words clipped and steely. He pulled the big silver-cased watch from a pocket of his vest and opened it by the pressure of a thumb on its stem crown. "Put your guns and belts on the table. We'll give the traitor a half hour—till eight o'clock to ride."

The sharp click of the closing watchcase had a sound like the hammer-fall on a cartridge in the split second before the explosion. It brought us all up sharply. If any rider insisted on keeping his gun after Hardwinter's explanation, he would brand himself as the traitor.

Dude Marland was the first to lay his belt on the table. Only a step behind him was Tremont, followed by Karns, McCabe, and myself. There was an easy swiftness in the movement of our hands, but stubborn reluctance stood out clearly on each dust-grimed face. Joe Bean was last. This meant nothing. Joe had been impressed by the other riders, with his lack of years and experience. With a visible nervousness he unbuckled his gun belt and laid it on the table, all the while moistening his lips with his tongue. He seemed to fear that Hardwinter would pin the traitor badge on him.

WHEN THE last rider had filed out of the office and pulled the door shut behind him, Hardwinter reached for a holster in the heap on the table. He withdrew the long barreled gun, broke it, and ejected the shells into the palm of his hand. He examined each one of the cartridges with care. A grimace of disappointment shaped his mouth as he finished. Presently, he reloaded the weapon with cartridges from his own belt, and carefully replaced it in the pile.

The Old Man sat down in the chair at the battered desk, and ear cocked toward the outside. After a long minute he shook his head and leaned back wearily in the chair. *He won't ride out—if it's him,* he thought. Regret showed in the slow lift of his gaunt

shoulders, though mixed in the gesture was a touch of hopeful anticipation, too, of which he was not aware.

We hauled up on the bunkhouse porch, as if by common consent. Not a man let his glance run toward the horse pasture. None of us wanted to appear to be debating with himself whether he should ride out, and what his chances were of getting shot in the back. All of us knew there were rifles in the bunkhouse, a half-dozen of them.

The moon pushed over the horizon and threw its silver white light over the faces of the men as they sat on the edge of the porch. All except Preacher Karns kept their hands and eyes busy, rolling cigarettes with more than usual care. The heavy silence that hung around the group was enlivened only by the chirp of a bird in a nearby motte of aspens.

Stopping the nervous swinging of his legs, Dude Marland spoke out, "Hell. Hardwinter ought've brought in a bunch of gun-slingers from Laramie or Cheyenne when he sent Katie down. We haven't got a chance. I don't hold with his idea that we got a wolf in the crew."

"Hardwinter's too damn choosey how he goes after Canady's bunch," Tremont said, as he got to his feet. He struck a match to light his cigarette and waved it impatiently. "You got to shoot on sight, and fast, and furious. If you get them first, they can't get you."

Tremont's impatience was easily understood. He was as fast as lightning on the draw, and deadly accurate with a gun. A dozen times he had demonstrated it by knocking over a running coyote with a bullet in the center of his skull.

Shorty McCabe spat in the dust and spread his big hands. "You got rustlers on the range; card sharps in the gambling dens, and long-fingered ladies in the dance halls and honky-tonks. The honest man's going to get hisself plucked like a Christmas goose wherever he rides. I wish Canady's gang would get themselves regular work and let me get some sleep."

PREACHER Karns stared off at the star-studded sky, and said solemnly, "The righteous have nothing to fear."

Joe Bean sidled in from the edge of the group. "How about a man fearin' a six-gun? He's got a right to shake some, ain't he, if he's on the wrong end of one."

"Unless he's a cold-blooded killer he's likely to shake some," I said, "No matter which end of the gun he's on."

A wedge of light from the office signaled the opening of the door—the end of the half-hour, before Hardwinter called. The Old Man faced us across the table, his face grim. He studied the shades and shifts of expression on our faces, as he had seen us use them to cover or reveal ourselves. If he saw anything out of the ordinary, he gave no hint of it. Finally, he pointed to the heap of holsters and belts on the table with a bony finger.

"There are your guns in the same heap you left them—the six of you," he said, a biting edge to his voice.

Dude Marland pulled his belt from the pile and buckled it on. He stood spraddle-legged, facing the Old Man, the lips of his jaw straight and hard. "Look here, Hardwinter, you've accused all of us by not naming the man."

"Dammit, Hardwinter," Tremont said heatedly, "you got to name him. We'll ride him off the range."

Hardwinter shook his head. His words struck bitterly across the quiet of the room. "I figure he'll name himself before the night's over, then I'll kill him myself." He flicked a hand in swift dismissal of it. "Saddle up, we'll ride in ten minutes."

We went to our saddles at the corral for our ropes, then came together in a knot at the bars to the pasture.

"The Old Man's gone loco," Dude Marland said harshly. "This harebrained plan of his to try to capture a dozen rustlers beats all his plans. Hell. Maybe we oughtn't to ride. A couple of us are likely to join the bunch in the aspens."

"Maybe some of Hardwinter's plans were better than they look to be," I said. "Remember, he thinks there's a traitor in the crew."

"Right or wrong, Hardwinter put suspicion on all of us," Tremont put

in. He let his glance run over the other men in the dim light. "Damnit, if there's a traitor in the crew, he ought to hightail it out of here right now."

"He sure ought to," Joe Bean said. "Any man who'd be a traitor to Hardwinter would be smellier than a skunk. I reckon I'd shoot him on sight—if I knowed him." Joe made a little ineffectual sweep with his hand and studied the toe of his boot, abashed at his sudden boldness.

"Save yourself the worry, Joe," Dude jibed. "Hardwinter said he'd do it himself."

I caught up one of my own string of horses, and one for Hardwinter. We saddled and waited at the corral for the Old Man to come out. We leaned against the corral fence and smoked, the heavy silence of men too tired to even quarrel hung over the group, until Dude Marland spoke out.

"Look, boys, for one I'm damn tired of all this riding to no purpose, except to get shot at by Canady's bunch. The Old Man's plan for tonight might send us all into an ambush." I began to wonder about Dude. He wasn't talking open rebellion in so many words, but was planting the seed. If we didn't ride, the Flying K was doomed. Hardwinter would surely lose the last remnant of all that he and Katie had struggled for years to get together. I caught myself glancing toward the office door, wishing the Old Man would come out before the seed that Dude had broadcast had time to sprout. Another minute might be too late.

The door to the office opened, as if in answer to my prayer. That's what it really was, and a fervent one, too. Hardwinter came out and walked toward us with the rolling gait of the cowman. His step seemed springy and light, but to one who had known the tall, whip-lean man in less troubled days, a heavy weariness weighted his movements.

When the last rider had stepped up to his saddle, the Old Man said tersely, "We'll ride as planned."

WITH HARDWINTER leading, we headed south toward the ridge that formed the eastern wall of Buffalo Creek Canyon. The stillness of vast distances lay upon this sweet grass country, which flowed on in gently rolling swells toward the Bighorns, where cold patches of snow glistened under the light of the early moon. The feel of this fair country stirred me, and I understood Hardwinter's desire to hold it.

We splashed through the Middle Fork of the Powder, a taciturn group of men, each wrapped in his own thoughts. I wondered if any of them noticed the red blossoms of the balsam poplars that dotted the surface of the stream, or was aware of the sweet resinous scent on the breeze. Likely not. They were not in a mood for such thoughts.

A question popped into my mind that pulled me up straight in the saddle. *Why had Hardwinter stuck to his plan for the night after saying there was a traitor in the crew?* Maybe he did not intend to stick to the plan, but announce a change at the last minute. That seemed to be a sound piece of strategy. Another question plucked at my brain insistently. *What had made Hardwinter suspect one of us?*

I went back over the actions and bunkhouse talk of the men, myself included, during the past month. There wasn't a thing for Hardwinter to build upon that I could see. But the Old Man wasn't one to guess at things, particularly when it had to do with a man's good name—not Hardwinter.

We came to the ridge and followed Hardwinter's lead, who chose a winding cowpath through the timber. We rode in single file through the heavy stands of fir and spruce, with me bringing up the tail. Moonlight sifted through the maze of branches to cast a weird pattern of lights and shadows over us. Life was like that, I thought. Times and places when everything seemed clear and serene, and others overcast with dark shadows and uncertainties.

We reached a small clearing on the crest of the ridge. Hardwinter pulled his horse to a halt and stepped down. The rest of us slid stiffly from our saddles and gathered around the Old Man. He pushed back his battered hat, sweat-greasy at the band, and mopped

his forehead. I knew that if I had ever felt sorry for a man, this was the time. His tall frame was a gaunt reed against the moonlight, and a bleak weariness pulled his shoulders out of shape. Despite this, an indomitable resolution tighted the corners of his mouth.

"We get Candy tonight or the Flying K is done for. We'll spread out along the canyon floor in pairs to—"

"Wait a minute, Hardwinter," Dude broke in, his jaw out truculently. "Along with a lot of hard riding I've seen three of my friends chew dust. Now you're asking us to put a gun to our heads for Canady to pull the trigger. We'd be no match for his gang if we stayed together, and you want us to spread out in pairs."

"And one of us will be paired with a traitor," Tremont said grimly. "If what you said is so."

"There's no chance of getting Canady, if we keep in a bunch," Hardwinter said coldly. "He may not come in at the head of the canyon, but below us, if we stay together. One of you *will be* sided by a traitor. You can argue which is who when I have paired you off."

"I don't like this worth a damn," Dude said hotly.

"If any man wants to ride back down the ridge, let him go now," Hardwinter said, frost in his voice. When no one made a move toward his horse, the Old Man's glance swung to me. "Baker, you and Tremont go down to the head of the canyon. Dude, you and Preacher take a station straight down the ridge. Shorty McCabe, you and Joe place yourselves a quarter mile or so beyond them. We'll leave our horses here."

TREMONT and I hunkered in the shadow of a gray-faced boulder, a stone's throw from the trail that lay between us and the creek. A twist in the canyon brought the trail straight at us from upstream.

"This will be a good spot to get at Canady's bunch, whether they're coming or going," Tremont said.

"Couldn't be better," I agreed, letting my glance run from the heavy shadows among the conifers on the ridge to the more open ground of the trail. We put our backs against the huge rock and waited. Only the sing-song of the creek, rushing over its boulder-strewn bed broke the night's quiet. After a long spell of silence, I asked Tremont, "Do you reckon Hardwinter's guessing about this traitor business?"

"No," Tremont answered. "I've been figuring that way myself. It doesn't stand to reason that Canady could guess all our moves." He shrugged. "I'm not even trying to think who it is, and I don't believe Hardwinter knows."

"Maybe not," I said. "But why should a man do a thing like that, and to a square-shooter like the Old Man?"

"I've been thinking some about that, too," Tremont said, as he flipped a pebble downslope. "He must figure he's a smart one—ride for Hardwinter and steal his cattle at the same time. He might've come from Canady's bunch, but more than likely he made a deal after getting on with the Flying K."

"He must want extra money pretty bad," I said, a lot of contempt in my voice. I thought how suspicion might point to Dude, with his fancy clothes.

"I'd guess that's only half of it," Tremont ventured thoughtfully. "More than likely he'd rather have someone think he's a sharp blade than have the money he might get."

Our conversation came to an end suddenly, and we peered uptrail in the shadowy light. A noise like the sound of a horseshoe striking flinty rock had come to us above the sing-song of the creek.

I studied the gap, straining my eyes in the tricky moonlight until the boulders and trees took on the shape of horsemen. A cold sweat broke over me, and I felt its icy trickle down my sides. Shaking like a leaf on one of the silver-trunked aspens along the creek, I slid my gun from its holster and inched back to the protection of the boulder.

The noise came again. Swiftly, the ghostly shapes of nearly a dozen riders loomed in the gap. Canady was in the lead. There was no mistaking the brassy insolent posture of the angular man in his saddle, even in the misty light. Tremont edged back, in

front of and a little to the side of me, his gun held alertly. I wondered if his mouth and throat were as dry as mine.

FOR A SHORT minute the canyon was a dim picture of ghostly, silent horsemen—then it blew up in a hot blaze of light. Tremont leveled his gun, and I dove for his arm. The distance was too great for accurate shooting, but it probably wasn't so for Tremont. I missed his arm, and as I plunged by, his gun roared, then a second and third time, hard on the heels of the first shot. He emptied the cylinder before I could scramble up from my hands and knees. The wall-trapped explosions beat back and forth between the high ridges in peals of ear-splitting thunder.

Tremont froze stiffly for an instant, then whirled on me, his voice rough and harsh. "Damn you, you must be the one the Old Man's been talking about."

I heard Tremont, but didn't see him. I was staring woodenly at the gap. Between the fiery red flashes from the rustlers' guns, I saw the three lead riders, Canady and two companions, dive loosely from their saddles as a high-pitched scream mingled with the concussive roars.

In swift panic the other outlaws wheeled back into the gap, the three riderless horses galloping along with them. I ignored Tremont and started throwing lead after the rustlers. Tremont lunged after me, clubbing at my arm with the savageness of a grizzly bear.

Before I could question Tremont's contradictory actions, a crashing in the buckbrush grabbed my attention, and I saw the Old Man flounder into an open patch of moonlight behind us. Tremont whirled about, cursing, as he snatched a pair of cartridges from his belt and thumbed them into his gun. He flung up the weapon and fired point-blank at Hardwinter. My stomach turned over and my heart froze with cold shock. At that close range Tremont couldn't miss. My eyes bugged out. Hardwinter stayed on his feet and came on relentlessly.

"Throw down your gun, Tremont," the Old Man ordered.

Tremont's answer was a gritty oath and a spurt of red flame from his fisted weapon. With a thrust of his arm too fast for my stupefied senses to follow, Tremont snatched mine from my shock-frozen fingers. On the instant, as he jerked up the weapon, a red blossom of fire flowered from Hardwinter's hand. Tremont dropped the gun and clutched frantically at his chest, puzzled amazement squeezing the cold viciousness from his face. For the space of a long indrawn breath he swayed like a lodgepole pine in a heavy wind, then crumpled down in a motionless heap among the rocks.

"He must've gone loco," I said stupidly, scrubbing a hand across my face, trying to understand what I had seen.

Hardwinter shrugged bleakly. "I reckon you would, too, if you had shot three of your friends."

"Say that again, Hardwinter," I asked, as the other Flying K riders came crashing toward us through the brush.

"I knew there must be a traitor in the crew when Canady started to outguess us at every turn," Hardwinter said, as the wide-eyed stares of the men shuttled between Hardwinter and the lifeless Tremont. "I began to suspect Tremont. He was too quick on the trigger everytime we got close to Canady's gang—which alerted them before they were within good range of our guns. I examined the cartridges in his gun, but found nothing amiss. But I put fresh ones into his gun from my own belt, and those from his gun into his belt—all but one. I dropped that into my pocket."

PRACTICALLY any other cattleman on the Powder, who was taking the beating that Hardwinter was, would have driven a rider off the spread he suspected, or likely shot him right now, I thought, but not Hardwinter. The Old Man just wasn't calibered that way.

"Up there on the ridge in the moonlight," Hardwinter went on, "I opened the cartridge from my pocket with a knife. There was hardly enough powder in it to blow the bullet out of a gun barrel."

Now, I saw through it. Tremont, deadshot that he was, didn't trust himself with good cartridges when expecting to meet his friends. And, tonight, he thought he was using the ones he had milked of their powder.

I shivered a little when I thought of the awful chance Hardwinter had taken, but I guess the cards were meant to fall that way. Then I recalled Tremont fussing with the lighted match in front of the bunkhouse, and remembered that he had often done the same thing when we were going to ride at night. The act had always seemed to me to be a part of his usual impatience.

I let my glance run around the half circle of men. Their faces were questioning, sweat-stained masks in the eerie moonlight—all except Hardwinter's This was a great victory for Hardwinter, but you'd have never thought it by the set of his mouth. His weathered face couldn't have been more deeply seamed with regret if he had lost a son.

Dude Marland's lips twisted with a wry contempt. "You rub elbows with a broad stripe of skunk in this business sometimes." Joe Bean stumbled off into the buckbrush and heaved his supper. I wasn't feeling so good myself, sort of like my stomach was full of milkweed fluff.

It came back to me then what Tremont had said about the traitor more than likely wanting to be thought a sharp fellow rather than caring for the money he might get from stealing Hardwinter's cattle. I wondered what Tremont and Canady would think of each other now, if it were possible for them to think?

The gaunt, long-faced Karns looked at Hardwinter as he took a step toward the lifeless Tremont, and said, "Let's give him—the others, too—a Christian burial."

Hardwinter nodded. Then Shorty McCabe jibed, "Hell, yes, Preacher. If we start 'em right this time, maybe they'll go straight on the range they're headed for." ●END

THE MAN ON THE WHITE HORSE *(continued from page 27)*

ernment turned him down. The Department of Interior would have nothing to do with his plan to bring the Indians to Texas.

Sam Houston, however, still had an ace in the hole—a colonel by the name of Robert E. Lee. Lee was head of the American Army in Texas. If Colonel Lee would support his crusade into Mexico, things could still work out.

So he sent an emissary, A. M. Lea, to talk to Lee and sound him out on this. Lea wrote back that the colonel was a high-minded individual who would fight if the Mexicans attacked first, but who would not consider any "vulgar filibustering" or engage in any skullduggery.

Anybody but Sam Houston might have given up here. But not the high-spirited Texan. He leaped all the way across the seas for support of his plan. He tried to interest London in supporting his attack on Mexico. Would Britain supply him the arms?

Apparently England was at least somewhat interested in the plan and thought that the steel-tempered Houston, with his collection of Rangers, and a scattering of some Indian braves and Mexican rebels, might be able to conquer Mexico. The Texas Governor sent three agents to New York for a sub rosa conference with British agents to see if some agreement could be worked out.

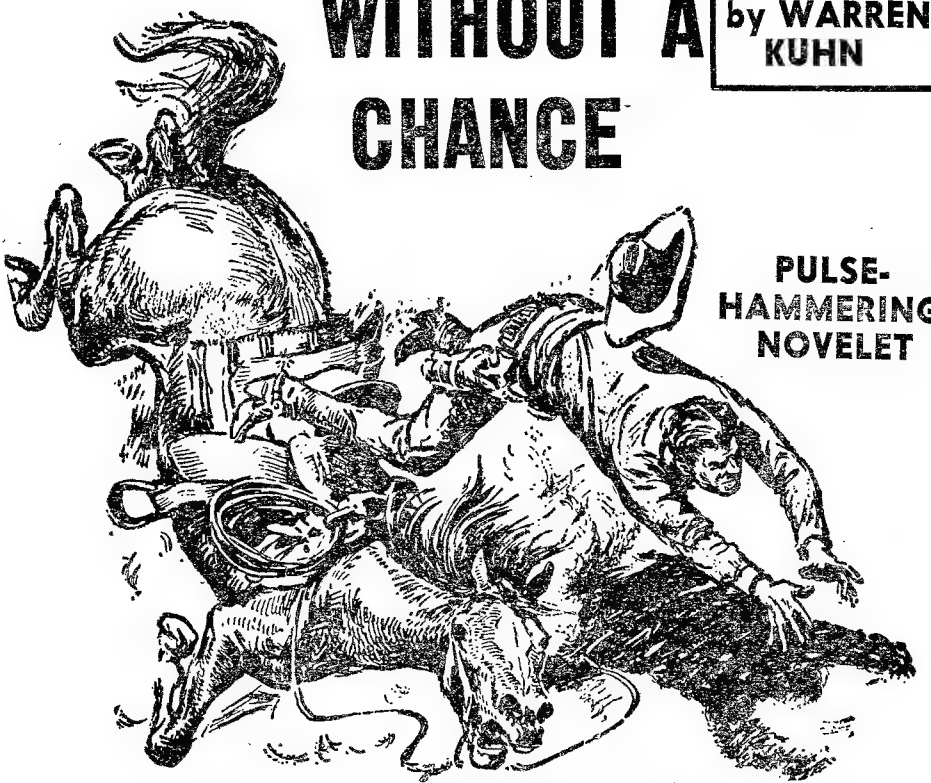
And perhaps, with Britain involved in all sorts of intrigues in those days and the aggressive Houston a leader of dynamic persuasion, some understanding might have been reached. But everything went up in smoke—the smoke of a cannon at Fort Sumter. The Civil War had broken out.

But if the War had come a few months later, Mexico might today be part of the United States, Sam Houston might have been one of our presidents, and—who knows?—the whole course of history might have been changed! ●END

WITHOUT A CHANCE

by WARREN KUHN

PULSE-HAMMERING NOVELET



The mare went down but he was out of the saddle even as she fell.

Always it had been like this for the kid, the fear, the hardship, the endless waiting for men with badges to come and blast him into boothill. It was the only life young Herb Peters had ever known...

NIGHT DAMP from the river had folded into thick layers the dust of the flats bordering the town. As the three riders moved out of the cottonwoods by the water, their horses stirred no powdery warning, the little dust that did rise clinging to the moist fetlocks of the ponies. In the early morning the three men rode without speaking down the town's main street.

Looking ahead to the next corner, young Herb Peters could see that the green, frayed blinds of the bank were still drawn. It struck him that the bank, like the town, slept fat and happy in its safe little bed. He felt the unfamiliar drag of the heavy gun at his belt and fought a savage urge to pull it free, fire it and laugh at the frightened, sleepy citizenry.

The thought must have shown on his face, for he heard the rasping drawl of the old man at his elbow.

"No shootin', kid," Ed Grist said. "Let 'em snooze."

From the other side and a little ahead of them both, Durg Grist turned slightly in his saddle. He grinned and his face looked mean and ugly with the thin scar twisting through the

stubble. Herb Peters had begun to notice how happy-mean Durg Grist was in the morning, like a bantam rooster tormenting a sick hen and having fun doing it.

"The old boy's right, kid," Durg Grist chuckled. "No better place than a bed for a man."

"Shut up," Ed Grist said. "Want to let the whole town know we're here? Hobble that durn lip of yours."

Durg snapped an angry look at the old man, but he turned around and shut up. Herb Peters was glad that he did. From the time he had wandered into their camp in the Bullions, foot-raw and belly-empty, his ears had been full of Durg's constant yapping. It seemed impossible that Ed Grist had fathered such a windy offspring. The old man himself was Indian-quiet, living under a moody cloud, thin lips stretching the parched, leathery face only to eat or growl an order.

And yet Herb Peters had found himself drawn to the oldster. In a way it was like having a father of his own to wake up or shut him up, and sometimes Ed Grist would talk, long and lonely and what Herb Peters guessed was kind of like father-talk. Whenever Durg would duck into a town for liquor or women, Ed would sit by the fire and talk long, as if he were sort of talking to himself about days that had never been.

"Durg." The old man spoke at Herb Peters' side. "We'll follow you into the alley."

THEY SWUNG down behind a high board fence that was warped and peppered with open knotholes but it hid the horses. The old man moved quickly to the bank's back door and pulled a short bar of iron from his belt. The padlock on the door broke with a small wrenching groan.

"Now here's one bank," Durg said, "I sure wouldn't put my money into." He was looking at the old padlock and grinning.

"You ever hear of vaults?" Ed Grist said. "This is just a door."

He opened it a crack, peered in, then he let Durg go past him into the bank. Durg had his gun out. The old man pushed at his son's gun arm, but Durg only shook him off and ducked inside. Ed Grist turned to the kid.

"Stay here with the horses," he said. "And keep your eye on that street."

Durg's grinning face showed at the door.

"We shore beat the banker to work this morning."

"He'll be along," Ed grunted.

"He'd better," Durg said.

The grin hardened a little and the scar twisted and Durg looked squarely at the kid. Behind the grin there was no laughter at all. "And you'd better not get sleepy."

The door closed again, the broken hasp swinging a bit on the jamb and Herb Peters went over to the fence and leaned against it, his eye covering the street from a warped opening between the boards. *I'm not too sleepy,* he thought and rubbed his eyes a little. He quit when they began to burn, resenting the fact he had even rubbed them.

Beyond the fence, the street narrowed on out of sight back toward the river. He could see the faint marks of their passing in the floury dust. The morning sun was beginning to push the shadows out from under the raised wooden sidewalks and lay a hot yellow film along the glass of the storefronts.

The kid saw the dresses and the bonnets with spade-tails behind the panes, and in a store next to them, a row of hanging lamps with the tiny burning spark of the morning sun caught in the pot-belly of each. He leaned heavier against the fence, wondering how it would be to be walking past the windows with money in his pocket. Or better yet, with a place to spend the money on. Like a house with lots of polished tables, and things set out on them, and the salty smell of slab bacon popping in a cozy warm kitchen.

He thought especially of the bacon. The old man had made frying pan coffee out on the flats with little balls of grease swimming in it. It made him a little sick and he tried to think of the bacon again. He was getting powerful hungry.

Turning, he glanced at the bank door. It was still closed. A real nice morning, the kid thought, wondering how that bed Durg had mentioned would feel. A long time back Herb

Peters could remember a bed, but there was no sensation to go with it. Oh, there had been bunks and a bunch of dirty blankets on those slats in the Laredo jail. But a real bed with thick, crazy-patch quilts and maybe a pillow....

CHAPTER

2

A SPLINTER bit into his forehead and he yanked back and knew he'd been drowsing off. He cast a hurried look up and down the alley and the street beyond. The town still slept. The street was empty. He was really hungry now.

He began to play a little game with himself to keep awake. He watched himself come around the fence and go walking, slow, slow and easy out into the street. And down the street there'd be someone else walking slow and easy, too. His own hand would be hanging loose and free, his fingers splayed about an inch from his gun-butt. And then the stranger would draw and his own hand would move and there'd be sudden gunfire and the figure in front of him would jerk and spin around and fall. And he'd just stand there, still loose and easy, and then slide his gun back into the holster casual-like.

Time moved with all the speed of a dead frog, and after a while even the game the kid played turned dull. He quit it and rubbed his eyes again, watching the street. He began to curse the banker for not coming. Right now, he thought, seeing a picture of a stern, white-haired man, he's probably filling his belly with hot biscuits and milk. He even hoped the man would get smart with Durg then. He thought of how the banker's mouth would open and grow big and round and how he'd sweat...

Maybe he didn't remember a bed, Herb Peters thought, but he sure had a good memory of sweat. Dirty sweat with stable manure reeking. Stale, smelly sweat with the hot Texas night slicking in the barred windows and not even the crumbly old adobe to make it cool. Sweat that was greasy cold on his skin, his lungs hurting, lying with a bag of tomato cans and flour close to his chest and angry men busting through the willow brakes around him. Even the sweat of staring down Durg Grist's swaying rifle there in the Bullions those months back, seeing the suspicion in Durg's eyes and watching the old man come up and pull the gun down and hold out a canteen.

He knew he must have heard the whistling then a good minute or more before he realized what it was. He stiffened and craned his neck against the warped fence and saw the man coming down the street toward the bank. There was another with him, a tall man with a store coat. They stopped about twenty yards out, spoke for a few moments and then the one with the coat went up to the store whose windows held the lanterns and unlocked it. The other one who had been whistling, walked on toward the bank, a short elderly figure with narrow shoulders and spectacles.

The hunger went out of Herb Peter's stomach with a rush, and he felt a coldness there suddenly. He thought of the coffee the old man had made and he ran a hand quickly across his lips where he could taste it sourly. About then he remembered the gun at his belt and he put his fingers on it, pulled it out. It was heavy, the metal cold. He held it, hesitating, his head pushed hard against the peephole.

In his mind he counted the steps the banker would make to the door. Herb Peter's eyes went around quick to the horses, to his own mount, a light, chocolate-brown mare the old man had brought in for him one day with a small rustled bunch. It would be easy to swing up and ride. But instead he put his free hand against his stomach, rubbing it where it was beginning to hurt.

Hurry up, he thought. Hurry up in there and get it over with.

He waited, anxiously, perspiration beginning to build under his arms and across his back. It was taking a long time. Too long.

A murmur of sound came rolling down the street. He stiffened, this time more gut-tight than ever. He pushed his eye tight against the hole, the sound of drumming louder. Trace chains, he realized suddenly, and the

rattle of harness and horses. Plenty of them.

THE FIRST wagon came into sight. It was long and high, a tarpaulin stretched tightly over a pile of something in the bed. Two men sat the wagon seat, both heavily armed, and on either side rode two horsemen. Behind the first wagon came a second, and then a third, each with two hard-eyed men and accompanying outriders. The kid caught the glint of metal on the shirtfronts of two of the riders.

He stood there, eye glued to the warped hole, his stomach churning. The little chocolate mare whinnied low behind him, made nervous by the stomp of the horses and the noisy wagons. Quickly, Herb made a half turn, his hand going over the mare's trembling nose. When he stepped back to the fence, he realized he was still holding the heavy gun. He raised it a bit, aware that it felt like a boulder dragging at his arm, and he threw a look at the back door of the bank.

Come on, he thought. *Get out of there. Get out.*

The door opened and the banker stumbled out, Durg shoving him roughly. The elderly man's face was gray, the spectacles half-off his nose. His lips were trembling. Then Ed Grist was out too.

"Mount up," the old man snapped. "Put the banker on your horse, Durg."

In the saddle, the three hunched just behind the fence, bent low over their horse's necks. The banker gripped Durg's pommel with shaking hands. Durg sat on the horse's rump, just behind the cantle. His gun pressed into the banker's ribs.

"They'll shoot us down," the banker was saying. "Those are all federal marshals with that gold shipment. We'll all—"

The high voice broke off in a moan of pain as Durg dug the pistol into the man's side. Herb Peters saw the hard grin on Durg's face.

"I don't care who shoots you, mister," Durg said. Then he glanced at Ed, his expression changing. "You sure picked a time to rob a bank."

Ed said nothing. He gave a quick glance over the fence.

"They're climbing down," he said. "Comin' toward the bank, comin' nice and weary." Then he kicked his heels into his horse. "Ride," he shouted.

CHAPTER

3

THEY SPURRED out of the yard, wheeling into the alley and into the street, straight for the wagons. Herb saw the men freeze by the wagons for a second, eyes wide, and then gunfire boiled out in the early morning.

Ed Grist went past the last wagon, half out of the saddle, firing with his left hand over his horse's neck. Herb saw a marshal stagger back against a wagon wheel, his arms going out. Then he thundered past the running, shooting men.

He was a good ten yards up the street, urging the little mare desperately, when a shock smashed along his leg and he felt the horse stumble under him and grunt. He glanced down, saw the gouged, broken stirrup slapping uselessly by his foot. Blood spattered his boot, but he felt no pain. Glancing back, he saw Durg and the banker coming up, Durg keeping the banker's body twisted like a shield. The man was yelling and the spectacles fell from his nose.

Three men rose from under the last wagon, two with rifles, crouching and firing. He saw the banker stiffen abruptly, reach for his leg and then Durg was shooting, the gun muzzle hard against the banker's side. Herb Peters had a last glimpse of the man toppling from the horse and Durg's face, grinning, and then Herb Peters was beyond the buildings, riding hard for the river.

Shots followed them, whining reports ripping up the street, but they were strung out now, moving fast. The sun had dried the damp and dust rose in choking clouds from the old man ahead. Herb squinted, saw the trees by the river come up close before him. And heard the little mare grunt beneath him, stumble and catch its stride, going on. Then it grunted again and Herb felt the warm wetness come against his leg and knew why he had felt no pain.

In the pebbly shallows the mare went down, but he was out of the saddle even as she fell, and he landed on his knees. The sharp stones cut him and he struggled up, seeing the red flush out around the little mare's belly. He stumbled toward it, throwing up his gun, not wanting it to be in agony. But a look told him. It was dead.

The old man reined back, splashed over towards him. The leathery old face was tight, the eyes burning.

"Behind me," Ed Grist yelled and Herb Peters vaulted up, swinging his leg over the rump, gripping the old man around the bony waist. Durg splashed past, his horse running wild-eyed.

ACROSS THE river, they turned out for the flats, drumming through the green stink of greasewood. Ahead, the mountains that ringed the little town rose in blue tangles. They had left fresh horses in their camp at the foothills, hidden in the brush. With fresh mounts they could leave the posse that must already be forming behind them. Only they had not planned on two horses, Herb knew, and his stomach grew even tighter. Even now the old man's horse was growing weaker, falling behind the bay that Durg pushed on ahead of them.

A mile or so dropped to the rear, the river going out of sight and the greenness vanishing. The were meeting little ridges now. Hours before they had waited there, making coffee in the gray dawn, before heading for the town. The ridges had seemed gentle, rising like easy rolls in the land. Now the ridges were steep and eroded, the gullies wide and threatening.

Danny threw a look backwards, toward the river. The mesa country ran out into brush-studded nothingness and there was no rising dust cloud following. He wondered about that, knowing it was strange that armed riders had not yet begun on their trail.

Above the jouncing, he tried to yell it into the old man's ear. Ed Grist grunted, shaking his head and he nodded toward the far right. There dust rose.

"Only one way out of the valley," Ed Grist shouted above the driving hooves. "They're smart...spreading out on both sides to cut us off."

Herb looked to the left. A similar brown haze was building far off in that direction. But the mountains ahead were looming large.

It was a hammering, saddle-grinding race, the two remaining horses growing weaker with every yard. On either side, far off, the brown clouds were moving up opposite them and then moving a little beyond, and Herb saw that Durg and then the old man were veering off to the foothills. Rocks began to lump up and Herb could see the canyons opening in the high ridges beyond.

They were among the boulders when he heard Durg's horse scream shrilly. He saw it go down and Durg plunging into the brush, crying out. The old man pulled up hard, the horse's haunches pressing back wearily. Dust came up around them, but through it Herb saw Durg's mount threshing with its three good legs, its right hind one turned back sharply, dragging in the eroded gully that had broken it.

Durg stumbled out of the brush, bruised and cursing. He kicked savagely at the threshing horse and ran on up among the rocks. A canyon opened just before them, with thick, massed slopes and heavy growths of trees.

"He left it," Herb yelled, his eyes staring at the agonized animal. His gun was at his belt, but he found himself unable to reach for it, seeing only the disappearing shape of Durg darting high up the slopes.

The old man, looking at him queerly, reined by and drew his gun. One shot and the crippled horse flopped back over the gully and lay without moving.

"He left it," the kid said again, his voice flat.

The old man slid down from his horse, still looking at him. He walked around the animal stiffly.

"Yeah," the old man said, and then without breaking his stride he undid

his saddle and threw it down, after first yanking the rifle from under the stirrup. The horse stood, head down, lather streaking it, flanks heaving. The old man started up the slope. Herb watched him and the old man stopped.

"Maybe you like the smell of rope," old Ed Grist said. His voice was a little softer than it had been. Herb Peters wiped his lips and then he edged past the dead horse and followed Ed Grist up into the hills.

CHAPTER

4

WITH THE moon down, the stars glittered with a hard brilliance there in the mountains. Herb Peters drew the worn denim jacket around his shoulders and shivered. He shoved his back harder against the cold rock behind him and looked at the sleeping form of Durg Grist stretched out nearby.

Smack up against his ribs, Herb Peters thought, remembering the escape from town and the spectacles falling from the banker's nose just before Durg shot him. And now Durg slept like a coiled, mindless snake there in the rocks. Herb almost fancied he could still hear the painful threshing of the horse that was now food for the coyotes on the flats far below.

And come dawn there'll be more meat for the wolves. Somehow the mountain night seemed colder than ever.

He almost cried out at the hand on his knee. Ed Grist hunkered down beside him. He had come out of the cedars above. The old man didn't speak. He just sat, his arms lying out upon his knees, the rifle leaning back against the bowed chest.

Something deep down inside of Herb Peters made him want to speak out, but he held back the words. Herb Peters was not sure of what he wanted to say. It was always like this, this wanting to talk and not knowing how. Even in the dimness, far back, in the loneliness of the freight yard that was as far back as he could remember, there'd been this speechlessness, this inability to make the words say what he wanted them to say. Instead, they stayed bottled up like buzzing, itching flies deep down in his stomach, trying to get out.

The kid tried to remember when it wasn't so. He thought of the stables, the growing years stretching him into awkwardness, and the hulking, angry man in the freight yard who cursed him for a burden. And in the border jobs, swamping and spittoon-cleaning in rattle-trap hotels, even there he was alone with words that wouldn't come. And in the jails—especially the jails—feeling the red welts on his face when they hit him for not telling them anything about himself.

And now here, in the mountains, with the past crumbled and cut off. Even in its rottenness the past had never been like this, with the endless fear of waiting for men with badges to come and drive them out of the rocks. If he had known it, Herb Peters would have guessed he was full of the hot need for crying, to empty himself of the thing that burned within him.

Ed Grist spoke.

"Takes a lonely kind of hombre," Ed Grist said, "to like mountains, kid. A man's made for towns." He said nothing more for a long moment, and then he said, "Get some shut-eye." His voice was edged with a deep weariness.

The kid tried to protest.

"No," he said. "I ain't tired, Mr. Grist."

The old man shrugged.

"Suit yourself," he said and leaned back, watching out over the shadowed skeleton of the mountain that dipped on and on under the stars. When he turned his head again, the kid was asleep, his head bent forward toward his knees.

It was there only for a moment, but it was there, drawing up the leathery skin into a deep, worn crisscross of dry folds. The old man smiled a bit longer, and then he looked back out across the ridges, the bones in his legs aching in the cold. A pain filled the sucked-in hollows of his back like twin bags full of smoldering wood.

My kidneys, the old man thought,

and he put his hand down between his back and the rock wall. After a while a feeble warmth came out of his fingers and cushioned his body against the cold, and the night grew a little easier.

CHAPTER

5

ON THE THIRD day they found the cabin. Or rather Durg found it and circled back to tell them. The old man listened and then without even a grunt pushed off to look for himself, leaving the two of them to follow.

The cabin was small and weathered, a single square of logs with a door of slab lumber. It had a rough stone chimney that leaned in toward the roof. There was no smoke and the cabin itself, with brush grown thick around it, seemed deserted.

Watching from the cover of a wooded ridge above, Herb found himself wondering how it would be to eat food cooked on a stove again. He could feel his tired spine tickling the front of his empty stomach. The old man had snared a rabbit on their first day in the mountains and Herb had watched him split the rabbit's skull to toast the brains in a cake on the coals. It had made his belly crawl, but in the two foodless days since the thought of that dripping cake had begun to resemble biscuits swimming in honey.

Durg, as usual, said it for him.

"We gonna set up here all day?" Durg watched the old man with contempt in his eyes. "I ain't got no snake belly that can eat bugs."

The old man didn't turn his head. He kept his eyes roving the sloping ridges rimming the cabin. And then he stopped. And pointed. They both followed his pointing finger and saw the hole in the rock face, almost buried under brush. A mound of earth had spilled unevenly from it down through the thickets.

"Miner," the old man grunted. "We go in."

They waited until Durg had gone in a long sweep to the opposite side of the face. Then they came down, Herb following the old man.

Closer up, the cabin seemed shabby, but there were marks of recent use around it. A horse had made tracks near it and there were fairly fresh droppings. Even Herb could tell that they were not more than a day or so old.

They found cover under a gnarled cedar about twenty yards from the door, while the old man studied the place. Then Durg showed around one corner of the shack. He held an axe and pointed to it, grinning. Ed Grist squinted, looking puzzled and Durg grinned wider and moved to the door and kicked it open. He was inside the next moment and then he reappeared, waving them in.

The man on the dirty bunk in the corner watched them with yellow, frightened eyes. His mouth was open and a trickle of saliva had fallen down into his gray beard. His hands held his leg and from the doorway, Herb saw the blood-soaked pieces of torn blanket the man had wrapped about his knee. There was a musty sick odor in the room, a sort of animal stink.

Durg was by a rickety table in the room's center. He was draining the last contents of a bottle of whiskey, some of it running down his chin. Durg threw the bottle down, laughing as the man in the bunk winced when the glass shattered against the chinked logs.

"You got any women to go with the likker, pop?" Durg asked. The miner's frightened eyes made a sickly attempt at smiling.

Ed Grist then stood by the bunk, looking down. He glanced quickly at the bloody leg and then at the man.

"All we want is grub," he said. "Got any?"

The man's mouth worked, but he didn't answer, and Herb felt the flies in his own belly begin to buzz. Durg stepped past his father and grabbed the man's dirty shirt front.

"The hell with food. You got any more whiskey?"

Ed Grist made a quick motion, only his hand moving, using his gun barrel. The metal struck Durg's wrist and with an oath, Durg whirled, facing the old man. Ed Grist didn't even look at him.

"Look around, kid," Ed Grist said over his shoulder and started to talk to the man in the bunk.

On an overturned barrel, Herb found a sack of coffee and another small one of flour. There was a small hacked side of bacon. He started a fire in the battered iron stove under the chimney. Behind him, he heard the miner make a little sob and he forced himself to keep his eyes on what he was doing.

"I'll make him talk," he heard Durg say.

"Shut up," the old man said. "Go outside and keep your eyes open."

As Herb sliced bacon into a pan on the stove, he heard the man in the bunk say the same thing over and over.

"Honest, I ain't seen no posse. No posse at all. I just been layin' here... with my leg broke," he kept repeating. "My leg's all broke. My leg's all cut an' broke..."

CHAPTER

6

WHILE THE others ate, Herb, despite his hunger, felt the bacon and the fried flour stick in his throat. He kept watching the man in the bunk, seeing him lick his lips and Herb had to look away.

When Durg finished and went outside again, the kid got up and filled his plate with what was left of the flour and the bacon and went over to the bunk.

"Here," he said and handed the plate to the miner. The man hunched weakly on one elbow, nodding his head in thanks and pushing the food into his mouth with trembling fingers. Herb could feel the eyes of the old man on him, but Ed Grist said nothing. When he had gone back to the table, Ed Grist got up and picked up the coffee pot.

"There's some coffee left," he said and then the door pushed open and Durg stood there. He glanced at them both oddly, his eyes flicking from the old man to the miner. He wasn't smiling, but his eyes held a vague humor seeing the injured man wolfing the last bits of food.

It must have been his eyes that warned the old man, Herb remembered afterwards, for old Ed Grist started to move fast, coming up from around the table. But Durg was quicker.

"Eat hearty, friend," he said and then his gun was out and he fired.

Dust came from the blankets under the miner and the man's mouth gaped. The tin plate clanged loud on the floor and the man's hand gripped convulsively among the bandages on his torn leg and fell away and then his body slid sideways, hanging down over the edge of the bunk.

Then Durg's gun was swiveling toward them. The old man's hand stopped with his gun barely clearing his holster. He said nothing, watching his son. Herb felt his hands grow into big useless wooden lumps hanging at his side.

"Just don't do nothing," Durg said.

Moving carefully, his eyes on the old man, he moved toward the stove.

"Those horse tracks, huh?" the old man said.

"Yeah," Durg said. "A nice little bay. Drifted in a while back and I got it all saddled. That posse won't miss a fire as big as this cabin."

Suddenly Herb Peters understood. Three bodies in a burned and gutted shack and who would there be to say which was and which wasn't. Certainly not Durg, a rider on a fresh horse who would be miles off. And the picture of the town filled Herb's eyes again like the dancing fire in the stove and with it was the sight of a man flopping dead from a horse and another grabbing for a final bite of bacon and now it would be him and the old man, and in all the jails and during all the beatings it had never been like this, without a chance.

Durg's foot was coming up, pressed for an instant against the cherry-red stove and Durg's attention shifted to the pushing boot. And the kid moved.

Lunging, his body twisting, going for the protection of the table, he saw the old man moving too, his gun coming up. Herb heard Durg's blistered curse, the bullet that followed it smashing into the table top and the answering roar from the old man's pistol. There was a third shot and then

Herb had his own gun free and he fired at the bent and booted legs by the stove just as Durg gave a final kick.

THE STOVE toppled, its door flinging back. Blazing coals spilled out over the wooden floor, white flames leaping like fiery water across the cabin.

Above Herb, a shot whanged into the lantern on the table, plunging the cabin into blackness. Feet scrambled somewhere, dragging feet, and then the fire started up the wall, spreading rapidly.

The kid flattened, seeing the gun in his hand catch the dancing red of the flames on its barrel. It grew lighter in the cabin as the fire leaped higher.

A shot blasted out of the dark of the far corner and the kid saw shadows move. He tried to squeeze himself into the dirty floor, feeling the splinters dig his chin. A table leg was before him. Durg fired again and the kid grabbed for the leg, twisting it. The table teetered and fell in front of him.

Flames were all around him now, but at least he had the protection of the table shielding him for a moment. Turning a bit, he saw the old man stretched out nearby. There was a wet redness on the old man's lips and they moved.

Herb scrambled over, keeping the table between him and Durg. He could feel the oven heat of the flames that were closing in. The door was a few feet away, still open. He threw a glance at it, wanting desperately to throw himself outside into the darkness. He turned to the old man.

"Go on, kid," Ed Grist muttered and his face twisted with a sudden agony. He jerked his chin feebly toward the open door. "Get out!"

"With you," Herb said, putting his hand under Ed Grist's shoulder. The old man was a dead weight. Herb pushed his face close to the old man's, the heat from the flames like an oven against his skin.

"We'll drag the table along," Herb said.

"No. Durg's too good a shot." The old man sucked for air. "I think...I think I winged him."

Little red bubbles began to form on Ed Grist's lips.

"Go on," he said. "Get out of these mountains."

The bubbles grew thicker and the old man's head dropped back. Herb felt the flies start to go crazy in his stomach, buzzing mad with the heat. Feet came alive from the corner in the same moment and Durg's lean figure was going for the door. Wood came sloughing off in ugly splinters from the table as Durg's gun tried to find him, and then the kid was rising, feeling the hot gun buck in his hand and Durg was going down on his knees, his gun shooting into the floor, and then he sprawled, his eyes staring toward the door.

Herb bent, trying to reach the old man and a blast of heat hit him full in the face. Sparks fell onto his clothes, the corner of the cabin breaking apart in red thunder. Something cracked loudly above and he saw more sparks shower down. The roof was giving way.

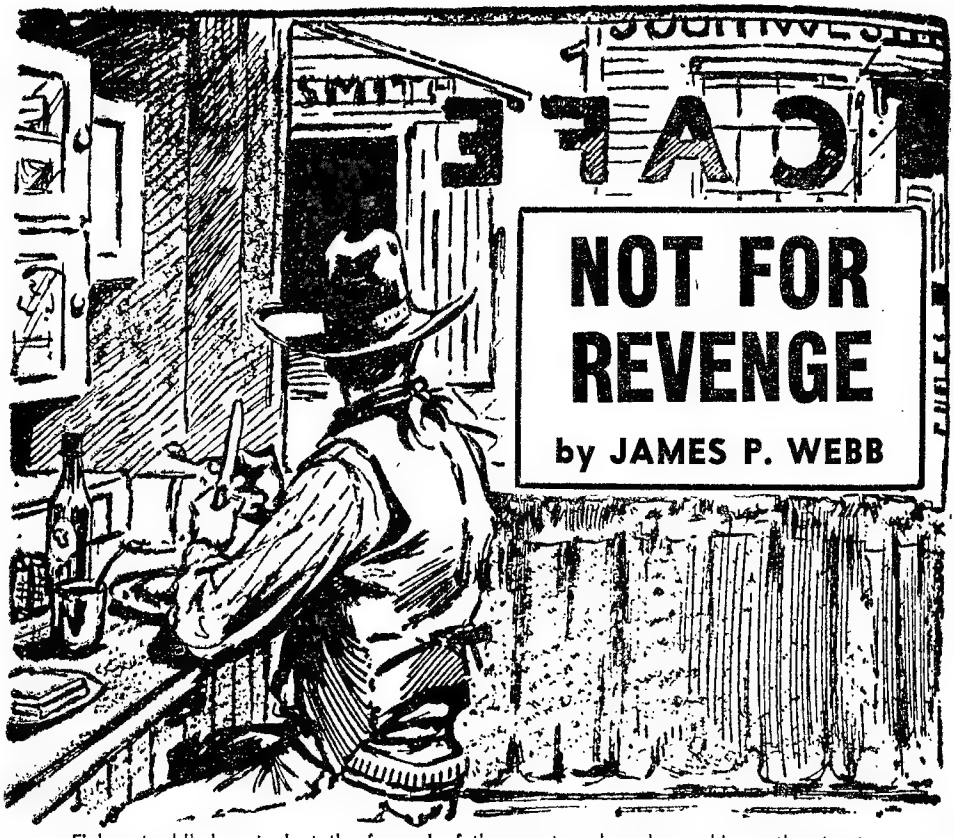
He threw himself for the door, feeling the cool night as he stumbled out into the brush. Behind him, the cabin began to drop its flaming ribs down into the room. The horse Durg had saddled was by the gnarled cedar, its eyes rolling, stamping uneasily, its flanks stained with crazy red shadows from the burning building.

By the time he was well up the ridge where a final saddle made a sloping step into a canyon beyond, the distant fire was almost lost among the slopes. He reined in the bay and looked back.

The flats opened from the canyon mouth below him, and he thought of what the men from the flats would find when they came, knowing too that the old man had given him a chance.

He watched for a time, the smoke still seeming to reach out from the far-off blaze and sting his eyes. Then he turned, kneeing the bay down into the canyon, leaving the fire to the loneliness of the night and the wooded darkness, and taking only the sting of the smoke with him, in his eyes.

● END



NOT FOR REVENGE

by JAMES P. WEBB

Finley straddled a stool at the far end of the counter where he could see the street.

Cheyenne Williams, cradling his shotgun, only wanted to say that he kept a peaceful town and it was going to stay that way. "Sure," Ed Finley told the manbreaker . . .

DEEP CREEK flowed past the western edge of Benbow. A bridge made of timbers heavy enough to sustain the weight of ore wagons spanned the water at the end of Herrin Street. Ed Finley drew rein at the entrance of the bridge, rolled a cigarette and studied the lights of the town.

Herrin Street lay before him, a pale track in the outflung lights of the buildings on either side. Benbow had changed. Finley smoked his cigarette while bitter thoughts ran through his mind. He had left this town years ago, after having killed Fred Melton, a braggart gunman, in a saloon. And years ago the town had been a sleepy settlement, a cow-country trading center, where Finley's father had sold general merchandise. Now, though his father still had a store here, everything else had changed. Silver had been discovered in the surrounding hills, and Benbow had mushroomed into a noisy mining camp.

Lately, a growing eagerness to see his father had become so strong that Finley had decided to ride into town. He thought it likely that few of the present residents would know him, anyway.

Finley tossed away his cigarette and straightened in the saddle. He was a tall man with sloping shoulders and long, muscular arms. His weather-beaten face, hardly handsome, was strong and attractive, and his hair was thick and red. Shirt, trousers and hat were gray, and the scarred leather chaps were of an indeterminate color because of their age and hard usage. The bone butt-plates of his .45 Colt's were yellowed by a long period

of frequent contacts with the palm of a hand.

He rode across the wooden bridge and entered Herrin Street; and a moment later he was in the midst of the wildest, toughest, noisiest part of the mining camp. Saloon doors flapped, throwing forth yellow light as men tramped in and out. Yelling horsemen raced past Finley. From somewhere came the sound of gunfire.

Finley passed the Golden Calf, Tass Holcomb's saloon and gambling hall. Standing in his stirrups, Finley could see the entire length of the long bar and catch the glitter of the gilded swinging lamps. The appointments of the saloon indicated Holcomb's faith in the future of Benbow. The Golden Calf was no dingy hole-in-the-wall joint. Men were milling about inside, though it was a comparatively quiet hour. The day was just blending into night. A little later, Finley knew, the town would be wilder and busier than it was now.

Herrin Street, once a trail passing through a sleepy settlement, ran the entire length of the town. It was wide and dusty, and now it was crossed by several other streets. At the end of the block, Finley came to Pace Street and swung his mount over against the hitchrack in front of a high dark building on the north side of Herrin. A vague glow from the hotel across the way touched the sign above the doorway:

FINLEY'S STORE
General Merchandise

The rider's eyes lifted to the upper-story windows and found them dark. A frown of perplexity put two vertical creases between his sandy eyebrows. The living quarters were above the store, and at this early hour his father would not have retired for the night. But likely he was in one of the saloons.

A LEAN MAN with a badge pinned to his vest went along the sidewalk with a sawed-off shotgun under his arm. Finley surmised that this man was the town marshal.

Finley swung his horse into Pace Street, rode around to the rear of the building and dismounted in the black shadow under an outside stairway which angled up a wall to a landing and a door. He stood for a moment with bent head, listening to the growing wildness of the town. Then he climbed the stairway, found the outer door unlocked and entered. Closing the door, he listened for a moment, heard nothing inside the room, and struck a match.

The brief flare showed him a narrow room, vacant except for some empty boxes, a broom and a bucket, and a few odds and ends. This was what Finley had expected to see here. This outer door was never kept locked, and this room served the purpose to which many people put a back porch.

Finley crossed to another door and tried the knob. This door was locked. He knocked sharply on the panel with his knuckles, waited briefly for an answer which did not come, and turned on his heel. He went out, closed the door, and went down the stairway to his horse. Finley had a key to that door in his pocket, had carried it for years, but he did not choose to enter just then.

Back in Herrin Street, he rode eastward one block and swung into Garrard. A short distance away he could see the yellow glow of the lantern hanging over the door of Venter's livery stable.

The hostler who came out was unknown to Finley. Hostlers, like marshals, came and went in Benbow—though usually they didn't go the same way.

"Give him plenty of hay and a little oats," Finley said, stepping down. "I'll leave the chaps with you, too." He unbuckled his gunbelt, dropped off the leather chaps, which he threw across the saddle, and rebuckled his gunbelt. He bent and removed his spurs. "Who's the marshal here now?"

"Cheyenne Williams." The hostler, a lantern-jawed young man of slight build, bent a sharp, half-furtive stare at Finley. "Long and hungry-lookin' hombre, mean as a tarantuler."

"Happen to know where I can find Pat Finley?"

The hostler's loose lips moved in the beginning of a smile which did not develop; his stare sharpened, and something akin to grim amusement

lightened the surface of his pale, watchful eyes. "He's out of town now."

Out of town. Probably gone somewhere to buy goods. Finley could ask whoever had been left in charge of the store and find out the details. In the meantime, he would go up to his father's quarters to sleep.

Coming back to Herrin Street, Finley paused on the sidewalk to watch the ebb and flow of the night life. Holcomb's Golden Calf, nearly two blocks up toward the creek, threw a wide glow of light from its doorway. A block nearer, on the opposite side of the street, Pat Finley's store stood big and blocky in the darkness. Across Pace Street from the store was the Catamount Saloon, smaller than the Golden Calf. At Finley's right stood the old hotel, the Benbow House. Owned by old Arthur Dewberry, it had been here a long time. The rattle of dishes in the dining room and kitchen reminded Finley that he was hungry.

Diagonally across the street, Finley saw a lighted doorway, the entrance of a small restaurant, and he started across toward it.

The hostler hurriedly attended to Finley's horse. Then he came back to the doorway, stood for a moment under the lantern and peered toward Herrin Street. Finley was not in sight now.

The hostler turned and ran through the barn, made his way among some wagons and buggies, angled across a dark open space and reached the back door of the Golden Calf. He went through the gambling room, hearing the droning voice of the roulette man and the rattle of poker chips, and came to the barroom in front. He paused there in the doorway while his glance roved. The place was crowded now. The glass pendants on the chandeliers sparkled in the lamplight, and the brass rail along the gleaming bar shone like burnished gold.

The hostler spotted the man he sought, standing at the end of the bar. This was a hard-faced man with a long whitish scar on his right cheek. He wore a soiled and spotted gray hat, a blue shirt, and a corduroy jacket. Two six-guns were holstered on his belt. He looked like any one of a dozen other bleak-eyed desperadoes, except for the scar.

The hostler eased up beside this man.

"What you want, Tim?"

Tim, the hostler, moistened his lips. "Well," he said in a suppressed tone, "he's come."

Bleak narrowed eyes regarded the hostler. "You sure?"

"No question," Tim retorted. "He answers the description, he asked about Pat Finley, and—it's him."

"He'll sleep up there over the store, eh?"

"I'd think so."

FINLEY crossed the street and glanced into the little restaurant. At this hour the supper crowd had thinned out and there were few customers in the place. Along one side was a counter fronted by a row of stools, and along the opposite wall was a series of small tables.

Two men occupied stools and busied themselves with coffee when Finley entered. They glanced at him incuriously and returned their attention to their cups. Finley straddled a stool at the far end of the counter, from which position he could see the two customers, the black-haired girl behind the counter, and the doorway. At the rear was a small kitchen, but no sounds emerged to indicate that anyone was there.

The black-haired waitress stood in front of him and she was observing him attentively. Her eyes were deep and dark, and her lips were full and red, and Finley suddenly became aware of these things.

"What will you have, Mr. Finley?"

Finley's eyes narrowed. He had been in town only a short time and apparently had been noticed by few people. Yet this waitress knew his name.

"How about a steak?"

She nodded, her dark eyes studying him unobtrusively. "I have one nearly ready. Started it for a man who didn't wait."

She passed through the rear doorway into the kitchen, and Finley could hear her moving about in there. The two men who had been drinking

coffee got up and went out, and Finley was alone in the room.

The young woman came out of the kitchen with the steak, which she set before him on the counter. He began eating, and the girl stood back.

"You know my name," he said. "I don't know yours."

"Bonnie Brent. You look enough like your father, and then I saw you a good while ago. And I expected you to ride in pretty soon."

"You did?"

She nodded, saying nothing, and her dark eyes held a shadow.

"Brent?" he said. "There was a Sam Brent had a ranch fifty-sixty miles from here."

"My father. I was raised there. My father...died. I've been in this restaurant since then."

Finley went out into the noisy night and started along the sidewalk toward his father's store. A voice challenged from the darkness at the corner of a saddle shop, and Finley stopped, half turned, and waited.

Cheyenne Williams, cradling his shotgun, emerged from the deep shadows across the way and approached. He had a dropped-down mustache which concealed the expression of his mouth, and his eyes peered warily from deep sockets.

"You're Finley," he said affirmatively. "I like to keep a peaceful town. Heard you was here."

Finley said softly, "Now, who would be telling you that?"

"Here and there," Williams answered. "Some news travels fast. I've expected you to ride in some day."

Finley made no reply.

"Don't want trouble here," Williams said, after a pause. "Thought I'd tell you that." His sharp and watchful gaze held steady. "Just don't start any trouble."

"Sure," Finley said.

Another man bearing a shotgun emerged then from the deep shadows beyond the Catamount Saloon and moved away with the marshal. One of the deputies had been standing by, ready to lend his chief a hand if necessary.

FINLEY paused at the foot of the stairway at the rear of the store. The noises of Herrin Street swelled and ebbed. Cheyenne Williams prowled across the intersection, his sawed-off shotgun held ready, his long face turning from side to side.

Finley climbed the stairs, opened the outside door, and entered the vacant room. When he had closed the door, the street noises dimmed. He put his back against the door and stood for a moment, feeling the temper of the darkness. Dead, empty silence surrounded him—but his nostrils quivered.

He had caught the odor of tobacco smoke hanging in the air.

Carefully, Finley reviewed his previous visit to this room, and he remembered distinctly that he had not smoked here. Yet the odor of cigarette smoke, though faint, was unmistakable in the warm still air of the closed room.

Somewhere nearby a board creaked.

Finley could not locate the origin of the sound; but he stepped swiftly to the right, along the wall, and dropped hand to gun. Flat against the wall, his breathing shallow and controlled, he waited through a full minute. Tense and motionless, he gave his thin-drawn regard to the silence around him.

Directly across the room, a door-hinge moved. It was a mere ghost of sound, a whispery squeal of metal which could have been detected by none but the keenest and most attentive of ears. An hour ago that door had been locked. Now it was opening. A careful, cautious hand was moving it ajar.

Finley drew his gun, tilted its muzzle forward, and tightened the muscles of his legs.

There came the faint scrape of a boot against wood. A long, sighing breath was audible in the tense silence.

Finley said, "Who's there?" and moved one long sidestep to the right and dropped down, resting his weight on his toes and his braced left hand.

A gun across the room went off with a roar, and the muzzle-blast made a burst of orange light in the darkness. The bullet hit the wall high

and to the left of the crouching man. In the confined space of the narrow room, the blast of Finley's heavy gun was like an overriding echo of the other.

A man cried out in a shrill, eerie, fading voice. Finley heard the sliding rasp of cloth on wood and the dull thump of a falling gun. Boot toes rapped a sharp tattoo on the floor and then were still.

Finley lifted himself half erect. He waited, gun poised and ready, through a dragging minute of dead, empty silence. Then he found a match and snapped it alight with his thumbnail.

The man who had waited for him here in the darkness was sprawled on his back in the inner doorway, a six-gun loose under his outflung right hand. A second gun was in a holster on his left side.

Down the right cheek of the dead man an irregular whitish scar ran from temple to chin.

Finley stared down at the man he had killed till the match burned down and scorched his fingers. Then he spoke softly into the darkness, quite as if the dead man could hear and make reply:

"Now, I wonder what that was for?"

Finley found it no easy task to bring the body down the stairway behind the store, lash it to his saddled horse, and transport it unseen into the desert. It wasn't easy either to dig a shallow grave, bury the body, and pile stones on the mound. But Finley did not want the people of Benbow to know what had become of the scar-faced man until he'd learned why the fellow had tried to bushwhack him.

FINLEY slept in the quarters above the store, and arose rather late in the morning. Bonnie Brent's dark eyes smiled when he entered the little restaurant, but beyond the smile he detected a shadow.

"How about some eggs and coffee?" he said.

"Right away." She went into the kitchen, and he heard the sounds of preparation as she began filling his order. This was another slack period in the restaurant, because Finley had slept late.

When she placed his eggs and coffee before him, she did not go away, but stood back from the counter and looked at him.

An elderly man appeared in the doorway, saw Finley and came forward. Finley recognized him as Arthur Dewberry, owner of the Benbow House. Dewberry took the stool on Finley's left.

"Howdy, Ed."

"Howdy, Mr. Dewberry."

The old man's hair, thinning on top of his head, was completely white. His pallid face was clean-shaven, and folds of loose skin, like wattles, sagged below the line of his jaw. The skin on the backs of his thin hands showed the transparency of age, and the veins stood out darkly.

"So you're here," Dewberry said. "Knew you would be, but I wish I could impress on you the futility of revenge. If I'd known where you were I'd certainly have got word to you in time for the funeral."

This was strange talk. An icy finger seemed to climb along Finley's spine. He laid down his fork. "Funeral? What funeral?"

Dewberry's eyes widened a little, then narrowed down. The girl gasped and put her hands to her bosom.

The old man said, "Ed—can it be you haven't heard? You don't know?"

"Heard what? Know what?"

"About Pat?"

Finley's fingers gripped the edge of the counter. "What do you mean?"

"He was buried a week ago," Dewberry said reluctantly.

The blue of Finley's eyes darkened with shock. "Buried!"

Dewberry nodded. "Got into an argument with a drifter named Timber Allen. In the Catamount Saloon. Pat was finally goaded into a fight, and Allen shot him. Witnesses said Allen fired in self-defense, and there's been no warrant issued for his arrest."

"I thought that was why you were here," Bonnie Brent murmured. "Ever since you went away, I've hoped you'd come back, but not this way. Not for revenge."

Finley looked at her. He seemed to be thinking of something far away and long ago. Presently he turned his attention from the girl to the old man.

(*please turn to page* 97)

SOUND OF THE DRUM

by JAMES CLYDE HARPER

Samuel Sherman Smith knew his rights. He knew, in particular, the federal homestead law. And no lawless landhog was going to tell him different. . . .

FROM THE beginning, the feud seemed foolish to me. The States War had ended eight years ago, and most battle scars were gradually healed. To the majority of us making new lives in the untamed West, each day presented problems that pushed Antietam, Gettysburg, and Sherman's March to the Sea, farther back among the rubble of unredeemable time.

The feud began, I would say, because of the middle names the two belligerents bore. But perhaps it was because of the way Susie smiled at a Northerner despite the Colonel's long-standing denunciation. Or it might have been the blunt frankness of Sammy Smith, whose Irish ancestry was written all over his youngish tanned face.

It had already started when Sammy found me in town, the ire in his eyes matching the red of his hair.

"Are you Mr. Hardy—Sheriff Bryant Hardy?" he pugnaciously asked, and I knew that trouble had walked into my seldom-used cubbyhole office.

I blinked the interrupted siesta from my half-century eyes, jerked sock feet from atop the scarred desk. I fumbled beneath it to draw on my boots, then leaned back in my tricky old swiveled chair.

"Yeah, I'm the sheriff. What can I do for you, son?"

"My name's Sammy Smith—Samuel Sherman Smith." He paused as if the name might mean something special to me. But it didn't—then—and he went on. "I want to get a warrant for a man's arrest."

That didn't sound right to me. The muscular shoulders and hard-fisted hands indicated the man Sammy Smith had tangled with should be the one coming to me, if able to see how to find the way.

I said, cautiously: "Just who, and what's he done?"

"He's broken a federal law. His name is Wallace. Colonel Adam Bedford Wallace, to be exact."

I jerked forward so quickly I almost twisted off a leg of the rickety chair.

"Now *wait* a minute, son..."

The heat in his eyes rose ten degrees, and the red hair stuck up like the stubborn jaw stuck out.

"I know my rights, Sheriff. I know the federal homestead law. No man can claim more than one section of land, has five years to prove up. I was in this country four years ago, staked a place on west of that...that man. He won't let me cross his land to the place I've staked. I claim he can't keep anyone from crossing his land, just because he's homesteaded at the valley entrance. If he can, he would control the entire valley which is large enough for a dozen homesteads. Therefore, he's violating a federal law. You know that, Sheriff, as well as I do. So I want that...that Southerner arrested!"

SAMMY SMITH was within his rights. But I was at a loss to understand the Colonel's sudden belligerent attitude. He had brought his family to our country three years ago, hoping the climate would be good for his wife's failing health. But inroads gained by war's havoc and post-war's brutal living conditions proved too great for her to overcome. She died shortly after arrival, survived by the Colonel and Susie, a cute little trick of about fifteen.

The Colonel had salvaged enough of his southern resources to establish a home and start a modest ranch. He

knew little of cattle ranching, though, and depended on the questionable abilities of two lackadaisical men he hired.

I visited the Colonel soon after his arrival to be sure he understood the homestead law. Perhaps a few years my senior, he was a tall, austere man of two deep-rooted convictions: that God reigned supreme over heaven and earth, and that his beloved South should have won the war.

He informed me brusquely that he understood and would obey the provisions of the homestead law, even though he considered it and all other federal acts "nuisances created by damyankee Northerners."

Although I was born in Texas, which fought along with the South, I thought much of the new federal legislation was good, especially for a country beginning to spread like ours. But my part of the war had ended with the surrender of General Lee and I had no desire to bring it alive. I refrained from debate with the unswerving Colonel, and explained the "passageway" portion of the homestead law.

He could, of course, homestead at the valley entrance, and I agreed that he had selected a beautiful site. But he must permit passage in and out of the valley, provide a roadway if future traffic required. For, I pointed out, there were several homesteads on past him to the west that new homeseekers might eventually want.

He repeated that he would obey the law, and I never mentioned it again on subsequent visits which included the funeral of the Colonel's wife and several social occasions. The latter were always a delight because of the kitchen artistry of black Aunty Florence, a staunch member of the Colonel's household even before pretty Susie was born.

For three years now the Colonel had obeyed the law. Of course, no homesteaders had come to test the Colonel's neighborliness prior to Sammy Smith. Now that the Colonel had refused to let Sammy cross his land, I wondered if the Colonel covetously schemed to gain control of the valley. Or was it something else?

Then, slowly, it came to me—the way the boy had announced his name. I said: "You told me, but I didn't quite catch it all. What is your full name?"

"Samuel Sherman Smith."

I began to find the answer. The Colonel's name was Adam Bedford Wallace—the "Bedford" a pride of Southern generations. On a social visit, the Colonel had waxed loquacious over after-dinner cigars, told me that among the greats who shared the honored family name was Nathan Bedford Forrest, a southern general who had gained war renown by claiming his battle strategy was simply to "get there firstest with the mostest." The Colonel had fought with Forrest for a time before being among those delegated to harrassing tactics against General Sherman's march across Georgia to the sea.

I SAID to Sammy: "I'm guessing you're from the North. You're too young to have been in the war. But you have the middle name of a famous Northern fighting man. Were you named for him, or perhaps kin?"

"Kin, in a very distant sort of way. But I *was* in the war. I was drummer boy for General Sherman on his march across Georgia to the sea."

That gave me a start. "Did you tell Colonel Wallace that?"

"Darned right, I did! He bragged so much about the South's great battles, that I bragged about the one in which I took part."

I stared. "You didn't stop at waving a red flag at a bull—you tried to cram it down his throat. Colonel Wallace opposed Sherman all the way across Georgia—just mentioning the matter makes him fit to be tied. After you told him you were with Sherman, it's a wonder the Colonel didn't attack you with a club!"

"That's what Susie said. She thought I'd better come to you."

"Susie?" I repeated and watched Sammy redden. "He's her father, you know. Do you still want that...that Southerner arrested?"

Sammy wrestled with the problem's complication he had overlooked when he first stormily sought me. His open young face was a battleground of indecision when he weighed Susie's charms against the Colonel's belligerence. The Irish in Sammy refused to

retreat, although compromise was proffered in deference to Susie.

"He can't keep me from going to my place!"

"No," I agreed, and put on my hat. "But when we get there, I'll do the talking."

As we rode for the valley, Sammy told me about his "herd," two white-face cows and a bull, a heavy-meat variety uncommon to this country, but which was beginning to catch on.

"Had to work three years and scrimp to buy them, that's why I've been so long getting back to my homestead. Shipped them by rail to the end of the line, then drove them by easy stages to here. Now he tells me I can't go on, just a half-dozen miles farther..."

We passed through the creek-bordered valley entrance and I saw Sammy's "herd." They were near the creek in a cottonwood grove, but on this side of the Colonel's boundary line.

Take an Indian canoe, spread a Navajo blanket across the middle so the ends hang over the edges of the craft. Try crossing from stem to stern without touching the blanket. You can't, unless you jump overboard and swim.

The Colonel's homestead was somewhat like the spread blanket; the edges protruded into rocky, timbered mountain slopes that surrounded the valley, which actually was more of a high-country meadow with abundant water and grass for year-round grazing for perhaps three hundred head.

Passing the Colonel's homestead without crossing his land meant Sammy would have to "jump overboard" with his animals and go around through the rocky slopes. That might work for tough Texas longhorns, but not for Sammy's stubby-legged, broad-backed, short-coupled whitefaces.

The Colonel's attractive home, around which colorful flowers and vines are rampant, was but a short distance from Sammy's resting cattle. I saw the Colonel seated on the covered patio, which he insisted was a veranda. Susie was standing at the bottom of the steps where she apparently had been keeping watch for Sammy's return. The Colonel's two men lazed in the grove, near enough to the boundary to keep Sammy's cattle from crossing.

"Stay with your herd," I told Sammy, riding past the boundary which was imaginary no longer. Freshly driven stakes about a hundred yards apart stretched in a line in the immediate vicinity. An axe and sledge were near the two "resting" men.

Susie hurried toward the grove, the Colonel stalking behind. So I dismounted near the men and waited. Susie rushed on ahead to whisper: "You've got to stop them from fighting!"

No need to ask why. She loved her dad, but couldn't keep her eyes from reaching out to Sammy, whose eyes eagerly reached back across the intervening space. "A red-headed Irishman and a hot-headed warrior who marched across Georgia on opposite sides? Should I also move mountains, or maybe stop the sun?"

HER FATHER was too near for Susie to answer. I didn't like the gleam in the Colonel's eyes—looked like a cat about to eat the canary. But I was here to evoke justice, and I spoke.

"Afternoon, Colonel Wallace. Mr. Smith tells me you won't let him cross your land."

"And...?" The Colonel was of proud carriage and manner. His deep slow drawl usually matched his dignity, but now I suspected he chuckled underneath.

"And," I said, "you can't do that. You can't stop the traveling public. Remember what I told you when you selected this site—that you might have to make a roadway available..."

"I am agreeable to that," and the Colonel actually smiled. With his lips, that is; not his eyes. "I'm aware the traveling public is entitled to a roadway, and I've decided to establish one as the law provides. I'm sure you, Sheriff, are aware of the provisions for newly-established areas like this. Simply, it is required that where passageways previously existed they must be recognized, but where there were none, then new roadways shall follow the section lines. My men are ready to stake the way when the trav-

eling public," and the Colonel's drawl was triumphantly acidic, "decides which mountain it wants to go through in passing around my place."

"Colonel Wallace—" I began, but Susie interrupted.

"Daddy! Aren't you ashamed!"

"Why?" The Colonel's voice rose deliberately. "Anyone who can tote a drum all the way across Georgia can certainly walk the distance around my land!"

I knew without looking that Sammy's chin was thrust out, and that the shade of his face matched that of his hair. But under pretense of adjusting my hat brim, I checked. I was right, about both.

"Colonel Wallace," I began again, and again was interrupted.

"Mr. Hardy—Sheriff!" Although addressing me, Sammy's sharp voice directed a challenge to the Colonel. "Part of my three years' work to get enough for my cattle was with the federal waterways department. It's true what the gentleman says about new roadways where none previously existed. But tell him, Sheriff, he's completely overlooked the creek!"

SAMMY'S voice held ringing victory and I knew the Colonel was startled. But so was I, wondering what that unconquerable red-head was getting at.

"Any stream, Sheriff, created by nature and termed an act of God, cannot be changed against the public good. Water from these mountains carried by that creek ultimately enters a river somewhere. It may be large or small, many miles away. But people along that river derive benefit from this water. And any stream that contributes to the public good is specified as government property.

"The creek, therefore, becomes government property. A man can control the land along government streams, but he cannot control the streams. Steamers travel on rivers where they perhaps can't shore because the landowner will allow no trespassing. But the steamers can and do use the stream. That creek from here goes almost to my land—straight across this ...this gentleman's property. As a government-owned stream, I can use it so long as I stay within the streambed. I can use it, legally, to drive my cattle on home!"

I wasn't quite sure about Sammy's oratory. I agreed with him, up to a point. But it seemed to me, the best I could recall, he'd left out a word somewhere. "Navigable" was the way I thought streams had been described in the document distributed by the government.

"Oh, Sammy!" Susie cried, the lilt in her voice and the glow in her face implying she thought him wonderfully clever.

"Come across the boundary line and look like that!" Sammy dared, his eyes telling the world all the things Susie wanted to know.

Without hesitancy, Susie darted between the freshly-driven stakes. Sammy's arms were strong and Susie's lips were soft, and they left us stranded on this harsh vale of tears while they soared, enraptured, to breathless heights where neither war nor wrangling nor staked boundaries exist.

I glanced at the Colonel and found him staring at the distant blue sky. He seemed to be listening, too, for sounds he couldn't quite clearly hear. Perhaps it was a noisy drummer boy, marching fearlessly toward tomorrow with alert, valiant strength. Or perhaps it was diminishing gunfire that eight years ago had ended the states war forever.

The Colonel's listening attitude slowly vanished. He looked at me, and something akin to a smile warmed the edges of his eyes. "Sometimes battles are lost before they're ever begun."

His gaze then went to the two men. "Pull up the stakes and throw them away, then go to the bunkhouse and rest. We'll get him to re-locate next to our place, be boss of both. Then, if I don't miss my guess, your resting days will be over."

I knew the Colonel was right, accompanying him toward the house where experience had taught me Aunty Florence could produce hot coffee and fresh apple pie with the swiftness of a master magician.

I glanced back as we mounted the "veranda" steps. Sammy and Susie were still blissfully soaring. I winked at the Colonel who had also peeked. We grinned and entered the house.

●END

A GUN-CHAMPION FOR HELL'S HALF-ACRE

by PETER DAWSON

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★ ★ ONE OF THE ALL-TIME GREAT NOVELS OF THE WEST ★ ★

CHAPTER 1 *Reception Committee*

THE LOCOMOTIVE rumbled past them in a swirl of dust and cinders and escaping steam that laid a fog in under the glare of the unshaded lantern that hung from the station awning. The two men waiting there squinted their eyes against the flying particles and stared far down the tracks toward the oncoming red lantern of the caboose. Above the rumble of the string of freight-cars rushing up out of the darkness, the shorter of the two shouted angrily, "Here's your last chance, Sheriff. Let me handle this." His blunt and freckled face was set doggedly, and the glance he turned on his companion was belligerent.

The other, a five-pointed star pinned to the open vest over his narrow and flat chest, merely let down the corners of his thin mouth under his corn-silk moustache as his answer. The screeching brakes had slowed the train now and he was watching a tall man carrying a suitcase swing down off the caboose's step fifty yards below the station. The speed of the train carried the tall man on at a run for a few strides. Then both watchers saw him raise a hand in parting salute to the brakeman, who leaned out from the caboose's platform and swung his brass lantern in a hi-ball to the engineer.

Far ahead the locomotive's exhaust took up its interrupted pound and the last two cars swept on past the station and left a sudden stillness in comparison with the rush of sound of a moment ago.

TIME ★ HONORED WESTERN ★ ★ CLASSIC

The tall man must have seen the waiting pair, for he paused momentarily to transfer his battered fibre suitcase from right hand to left before he came on again. There was a certain effortless quality in his long stride unusual in a man so tall. When he had stepped well within the circle of light, his face showed aquiline and lean and with a certain smiling gravity beneath its weathered bronze. He was outfitted in a black broadcloth suit and a white shirt, the tight collar of which was obviously uncomfortable to him. A pair of well-worn boots accentuated his tallness.

He stopped ten feet out from the waiting pair, set his suitcase down, and drawled, "You're like two crows waitin' to make a meal off dyin' rabbit. Sheriff, it's past your bed time. Why the reception committee?"

The sheriff's thin face took on a deeper scowl. "I come along to make sure Gault tried," he said.

"Tried what?"

Gault, the short man, said scornfully, "To get you to take the side road out o'town, Ed."

Ed's brown eyes lost a trifle of their amusement. "What's wrong with the street, Tom?" he asked.

"You tell him, Sheriff," Tom Gault said. "You were so damned anxious to come along and make sure I didn't start anything!"

The law man said flatly, "Kid Ison's at the *Gem*. Him and three of his crew."

"I still don't get it," Ed said.

"They're waitin' for you," Gault put in. "Uhling probably sent 'em in."

"Why?"

"Things have happened since you been gone," Gault explained. "Our be-

Ed January had been ordered out of town, yet only his flaming guns could have stopped the badman combine running roughshod over Big Basin range . . . . .

loved neighbors have made a dicker with that sheep company to sell out the Basin. Uhling's threatened to tar and feather the first sheepman that sets foot on this range."

"And what's that got to do with me?"

"Plenty, January," Sheriff Peers

Ison's head tilted back, coughing blood, his two thumbs working back the hammers of the .45s.

muttered. His watery blue eyes fixed a hard stare on Ed January. "Uhling knows where the other Basin outfits stand, knows they're sellin' for a better price that he can lay on the line for their spreads. He don't know about you. He aims to make sure. So he's sent in his understrapper to make you another offer."

"He made me an offer before I went away. I told him it was no dice."... Ed laughed, a laugh that wasn't reflected in his surface-glinted blue eyes. . . "But if this is the way he wants it, it'll be a pleasure to talk to friend Ison."

"You think it will," Peers said acidly. "Start anything and I'll jug the lot of you."

ED JANUARY'S brows came up in mock-surprise. "It'd be worth it just to see how long you could hold Kip Ison in that jail of yours, Sheriff. You've been in office long enough to know who keeps you there."

The official mask of Sheriff Peers' face was broken for a moment by a real and sudden anger. "Any man that says I play along with Uhling's a liar!" he stated flatly. "You need takin' down a peg or two, January!"

"You takin' over the job?" Ed drawled.

Tom Gault said hastily, "Pull in your horns, you two! Peers, we won't start anything unless we're prodded into it. And we ain't walkin' around anything, either."

The hot flush that had clouded the law man's face gradually receded. After a moment in which his hostile stare held to Ed, he growled, "Don't say I didn't warn you," and walked off.

They waited until the choppy tread of his boots had passed out of hearing around the far corner of the station. Then Ed said, "He's makin' it mighty plain. That puts about the whole pack against us, don't it?"

"You could pull out of it."

"And let Uhling claim he ran me out?" Ed shook his head. "No, thanks. I worked ten years to earn the money for that layout. I'll hang onto it."

"Lines you up square in the middle, don't it? The Basin outfits hatin' you because no sheep company can operate without a right of way through your place to summer graze in the mountains. And Uhling not trustin' you not to sell out him and the rest of the cattlemen. Well, you have one more chance before they touch off the fireworks. If you're smart, you'll take it."

"Huh-uh. I stay."

"Why? There's a hundred other places you could go for a new start. Uhling's offer is fair."

Ed smiled thinly. "If you're through singin' your psalms, we might get on up the street and see Ison," he drawled.

Tom Gault's homely face broke into a wide grin. "It was worth tryin' anyway," he said, a little sheepishly. He picked up Ed's suitcase and led the way around the freight platform and back to a hitch-rail where two ponies, a chestnut and a roan, stood tied. He unlaced the pouch to the chestnut's saddle and lifted out a heavy shell-belt and a holster, handing them across to Ed and saying, "Thought you might need this." He wore his own weapon, a .44 Colt's, rammed through the waist-band of his faded blue Levis.

Ed took off his coat and hung it on the saddle-horn. He removed a shoulder-holster that hung at his arm-pit and transferred the weapon in it, a Colt's single-action .38, to the other holster which he cinched about his waist and thonged low on his right thigh. Then, getting into his coat again, he asked, "Is Les Pace the one that's bringin' in this sheep outfit?"

Gault nodded, swore roundly. "Damned if I can figure that man. You'd swear he was born with a brandin' iron in his hand. Yet he'll sell out a cattle range like this. No wonder Uhling's riled."

They started out along the cinder-surfaced path that led from the station to the town's main thoroughfare, marked in the darkness by a shadowed line of poplars and cottonwoods. Into a brief silence, Gault finally said, "Did yuh buy that blooded stock you went after?"

Ed nodded. "They're due in three weeks."

Gault let out a gusty sigh: "Well, you must know what you're doin'."

THEY TURNED into the street and in under the trees, heading for the

meager sprinkling of lights that showed at the town's center. Ed ignored his friends uneasiness, asked, "Any other news?"

"Old Bill Atwood cashed in. Him and his mule fell through a rotten ledge in the brakes north of the layout."

Ed's lean face showed a definite shock. It took him several seconds to say, incredulously, "Bill dead?" Then as the full realization came, he mused aloud. "The good ones always seem to go first. I hope it was clean and quick. That's the way he'd want to go."

They were silent from there on, to the end of the dirt path and until they'd stepped up onto the first stretch of awninged plank walk that fronted the stores. They both looked obliquely up and across the street toward the lights of the *Gem Saloon*. It lay fifty yards ahead now, and the wash of orange lights from its windows showed vaguely four figures that had the walk in front to themselves.

One man stood alone at the edge of the walk. He leaned indolently against an awning-post, a big man, solid-looking, his cross-legged stance giving a hint of studied arrogance. Behind him, in the shadow of the adobe wall, stood three others.

Ed stopped before the lighted window of a restaurant and reached into a coat-pocket and took out a sack of tobacco-dust. He sifted some of the weed onto a wheat-straw paper and offered the makin's to Gault.

Gault said, "No thanks." Then, urgently: "Ed, there's three others behind Ison over there. No one'll blame you if you turn and go back."

"You're spooky, Tom."

"The hell I am! I've got sense. They're hard-cases. If you go in there, they'll carry you out on a shutter. Four against two is bad odds any way you figure it."

"One, not two," Ed said. "You're not drawin' your forty a month to mix in on my troubles."

"That's up to me, ain't it? I tell you it's a fool's play to head across there."

Ed looked back over his shoulder and in at the restaurant window. His eyes all at once showed a live interest. "Who's the red head?" he asked.

Gault turned irritable to face the window and see the girl inside behind the counter. "Bill Atwood's girl. She took what money Bill left her and bought this...." He was abruptly aware that Ed had changed the subject and said savagely, "Use your brains, Ed. Odds is odds, but..."

"Pretty, isn't she?" Ed drawled. He turned his back to the window, flicked alight a match and lit his smoke, and then said, "Remember, stay set." He started out across the walk.

Gault let him go, knowing that further talk was wasted. He was for the first time in many years really afraid, yet his glance was touched with open admiration as he watched Ed's tall figure fade into the half light of the street. He knew what he was doing, and he waited where he was, catching his breath as Ed reappeared opposite to step in between two ponies tied at the hitch-rail, and up onto the walk within ten feet of Kip Ison.

He heard Ed's cool drawling voice say, "Like a drink, Kip?" and Ison's answer, long in coming: "Why not?"

He saw Ed step on across the walk and in through the swing doors, plainly ignoring Ison's three men. Then Ed was out of sight. Kip Ison's solid shape followed. It seemed an eternity of time to Gault before the three others filed in through the doors. Once they'd disappeared, his right hand lifted to the handle of his Colts and he started across the street.

Inside the *Gem*, Ed sauntered to the polished pine bar. A quick and cursory inspection of the room showed him that it was empty, probably through Kip Ison's foresight. His half-amused glance took in Pinto Mundorff, the dour-visaged owner who was tending bar.

HE TOLD Mundorff, "Two glasses and a bottle that isn't watered, Pinto," smiling a little at the drawn tautness of Pinto's face. Pinto had worked for Simon Uhling years ago. There was no doubt as to where his sympathies would lie if anyone started anything.

Kip Ison stepped in alongside him at the bar, putting his elbows on it, a

booted foot on the brass rail and letting his two big hands rest palm down on the polished wood. The greatest contrast between the two men seemed to be that Ed's hair was blond, his eyes light, while Ison was dark, with smoky black eyes constantly alive.

Ison said, with a touch of rancour in his voice, "Pace got a wire from Tucson today. The sheep company's sendin' a buyer in here Thursday, tomorrow. Looks like they're expectin' you to sell out with the others." He waited, got no comment from Ed, who was filling two glasses from the bottle Pinto had set before him. So he went on, "The boss' last offer still stands, January. That's final."

Ed pushed one of the filled shot-glasses across to Ison. "I'm not sellin'," he said. "That's final, too."

Kip Ison's face turned hard as rimrock, took on a down-lipped grimace. Then, glancing down at his whiskey-glass, a shrewdness crept into his look. He leaned over and, without touching the glass, sniffed of it and made a wry face. Then he picked it up the whiskey and turned sideways to the counter so that he faced Ed.

He drawled tonelessly, "Y'know, I've found out a thing or two about whiskey."...The hand holding the glass crossed in front of him to the edge of the bar.... "One is that it takes on the smell of anything it gets close to."...The glass came out over the counter-edge and Ison's hand tipped it.... "Right then, before I picked this up, I'd have swore it had the stink of polecat!"

His hand tipped the glass further and Ed was seeing the amber liquid spill in a broken line into the spittoon at Ison's feet. It splashed against the metal with a liquid sound that was loud against the stillness.

Ed glanced into the bar mirror, taking in Ison's three crewmen standing to one side of the swing-doors along the front wall. Then he was pushing out from the bar, his move calculatingly slow.

When he had arm-room, and with elbows still cocked, he lashed out with his open left hand and the back of it caught Ison hard across the mouth and drove him a full step to the side in a stumbling lurch. As he moved, Ed's right hand streaked to his thigh to brush aside his coat. He pivoted. He palmed up the long-barreled Colts. The move was fast, effortless and smooth and he wheeled as he made it.

His weapon swung in a tight arc and arrested the furtive move of one of Ison's men by the doors. He said tonelessly, "Kip, fill that glass and drink it down!"

Ison stood three feet out from the bar now, fists knotted and feet spread. Even though Ed wasn't looking at him, he hesitated in making the lunge he was set for.

"Like hell!" he rasped.

"I'll count to ten, to myself, Kip. Have that drink poured before I finish."

The stillness that settled down over the room was potent, ready to explode. Ison's men stood in a paralysis of caution, watching for their chance. They were a hard-bitten trio, all wearing double belts. Ed's glance clung to them unwinkingly. Then, after a long five seconds, Ison stepped sullenly to the bar and sloshed some whiskey from the bottle into the glass and raised it.

Ed heard a stealthy move behind him. Even before that hint of sound had telegraphed its complete warning, he was whirling to face the bar. The hard down-slashing blow of Pinto Mundorff's shot-filled blackjack grazed his shoulder. He leaned far back over the bar and slugged Pinto a quick glancing blow with his six-gun. The saloon-owner's eyes took on a stupid vacant stare, his knees buckled and he slumped down behind his counter, Ed already wheeling away from him.

Ed's Colts jumped into line with one of the only two lights in the room, an ornate cut-glass bracket lamp in a holder at one end of the bar mirror. His thirty-eight exploded and the lamp-chimney shattered apart and the flame guttered out.

HE wheeled in time to catch Ison's right hand blurring up a weapon from holster. He lunged, left his feet headlong in a rolling dive and hit Ison in the side with the hard drive of one shoulder. They went down, a second explosion from up front burst upon the stillness, and the swing-doors up

front swung inward and Tom Gault's voice yelled stridently, "Hold it, you high-binders!"

A fraction of a second later, Gault's gun stabbed flame to punctuate the exact instant the second lamp at the bar's far end flew apart in a crash of flying glass. As the gun's deafening racket filled the suddenly darkened room Ed was rolling clear of Ison. But all at once a grip closed vice-like on his arm. He slashed viciously at Ison's hand and felt his gunsight rip through giving flesh. He caught Ison's choked oath and then the ramrod's .45 was spitting a four-inch stab of powder-flame that scorched the side of his face and completely deafened him. He threw his body into a roll, and this time he was clear.

His roll carried him into the legs of another man. He came to his knees, then stood erect and took a full blow low on his left side. He struck out wildly, and his left connected full with a face. He heard the man hit the bar and fall heavily to the floor.

Up front, Gault yelled, "Watch it, Ed! They're across there!"

Ed reached out and felt of the bar and raised a booted foot and put it against the bar's upright face and pushed. The counter gave way under his thrust; it tilted and a moment later the sound of splitting wood and falling glassware rose above the scuffling sounds toward the front of the room, where Gault's voice momentarily sounded in a throaty cry of obscenity.

Someone slammed into Ed solidly from the right, knocking him from his feet. As he went down, the back of his head struck a second man's shins and Ison's voice snarled, "Who's that?"

He rolled aside quickly, and the vicious kick of a boot slid harmlessly off his thigh. Clear of those feet, he swung with his six-gun at the legs he'd rolled against a moment ago. The man groaned in pain, and then Ed came to his knees and threw a hard blow at the stomach of the second figure that was momentarily outlined by the scant light shining through one of the saloon's two front windows. His blow connected. He dodged out of the way as Ison, with the hurt shins, and the one with the aching stomach stumbled into each other and started slugging it out.

He ran back along the room and felt at the wall at a point he judged to be a few feet short of the door to Pinto Mundorff's office. His hand closed on an iron clamp and went up to the rope above it. This rope, running through two pulleys to the center of the room, supported a massive and ugly four-lamp iron chandelier the saloon-owner used on rare occasions when the room was crowded.

Ed tugged at the end of the rope, felt the clamp come loose. He let go the rope and waited, and a second later the chandelier crashed to the floor in a jarring thud that sounded above the shattering of the glass lamps.

A man out there howled in pain. A gun spoke twice, the powder-flare lining obliquely upward at the ceiling. Ed stepped backward against a chair. He picked it up and swung it over his head and let it go straight at the bar mirror. The crash of glass and falling bottles made a prolonged and growing sound that took several seconds in dying out.

A FAMILIAR figure was outlined between the bursting-inward swing doors, and Sheriff Peers yelled stridently, "Break it up, damn it, break it up!"

The scuffling sounds that had filled the room ceased and the room gradually quieted.

"Get a light," Peers called. "Ison, where the hell are you?"

There was no answer. The law man called again, "Pinto, light a lamp!" and someone growled surlily, "Pinto ain't feelin' so good."

A moment later the feeble light of a match flared up front. Ed saw Peers standing spraddle-legged before the swing-doors. His face bore an ugly look and his hands fisted a six-gun.

Behind him, Ed heard a small sound and wheeled warily in time to see the saloon's back door open. Then Tom Gault's stocky figure was momentarily outlined in the reflected light from the face of a wood-shed across the alley as he edged out the door.

Ed followed, closing the door after him and calling softly, "Tom!"

Gault came up out of the shadows, said, "Let's get out of here," and they passed the backs of two stores and took a narrow passageway between two buildings toward the street.

As they made the walk in under the awnings along the street, Gault said dryly, "You'll turn wild once too often, friend."

Ed laughed softly. "Milo Peers has his good points."

"Such as bein' able to give a gent a cell-cot for tearin' up a saloon. You'll never be able to slice it that thin again, Ed. And this is only the beginnin'!"

CHAPTER 2 Gun Trap

KIP ISON stared dully into the match-glow from where he stood in the heavy shadows along the room's back wall. The sheriff hadn't seen him yet. His hand was clamped about his left wrist to stem the flow of blood from the jagged gash Ed January's gun-sight had ripped in the fatty muscle of his thumb. His side ached throbbingly from the crushing weight where January's shoulder had first taken him.

His glance ran over Pinto Mundorff's wrecked place. The bar mirror was cracked and half fallen out in a huge broken spider-web. The bar lay on its side, split its entire length, and the floor out from it was sprinkled with broken shards of glass and pooled with spilled whiskey. The room smelled like the inside of a keg.

Pinto's booted feet stuck out from beneath his overturned counter. One of Ison's men was down near Pinto, half sitting against the bar and staring stupidly out of uncertain winking eyes, blood streaming down off his forehead. A second man's legs were pinned beneath the fallen chandelier, and he now cursed obscenely and made an effort to lift the heavy wrought iron from across his skinned shins. Ison's third man stood near the sheriff, holding the match and looking warily back into the shadows for a sign of someone moving there.

Ison went to the alley door, let himself out soundlessly. He was in time to see January and Gault disappear into a passageway between two buildings below. He followed, not seeing them again until he stood in the deep impenetrable shadow of a cottonwood just short of the loading-corrals along the tracks below the station.

January and Gault were riding their horses toward him out of the shadows, along the line of a road that ran past the tree. He lifted the short-barreled Colts he had carried in his right hand all the way down here. He levelled its sights on January's flat wide chest.

Then an instinct for caution steadied him and he lowered the weapon and watched them draw abreast of him. He heard January, barely twenty feet away now, say, "...out there tonight. I might as well settle this with him for good and all."

"Ain't one scrap a night enough for you?" came Gault's dry query.

"This won't be a scrap. I'll tell Pace he's wasting his time getting that buyer in here. Tonight's as good a time as ..." January's words trailed off as he rode out of hearing.

Ison stood there under the cottonwood a full minute after they had gone, frowning in thought. He wrapped his bandanna around his bleeding hand and finally walked back up the street to the *Gem*. Inside, he found Peers and the others working over Pinto Mundorff, in the eery and uncertain light of the miraculously unbroken and chimneyless lamp at the front end of the bar mirror. The bar had been righted and they had carried Pinto out and laid him on the floor ahead of it.

The sheriff got to his feet as Ison strode in. He eyed Uhling's man sourly, said, "This is the first thing I ever saw you start and not finish, Kip. It's goin' to cost somebody."

Ison asked brusquely, "You preferrin' charges?" There was little respect in his manner of speaking.

Peers shook his head. "No. You're all alive, which is mighty considerate of January." His tones were mild, for Simon Uhling represented the patronage that kept him in office.

"Pinto hurt?" Ison asked.

"Nothin' he won't sleep off."

Ison glanced at his men, said, "come on. We'll settle with Pinto tomorrow,"

and led the way out through the swing-doors. His ignoring of the law man was pointed.

Peers heard their ponies lift into a quick trot and go out the street. He glanced down at the saloon-keeper and a slow smile wreathed his gaunt features. "Take care of your own mess, Pinto," he mused, half aloud and blew out the lamp and left the saloon. He curtly ordered away a few curious onlookers out front and went home and to bed.

On the trail two miles west of town, Ison reined in and let his men come even with him.

"Slim, you're runnin' out on us tonight," he announced, speaking to a tall slat of a man who was holding a bandanna to a cut along one cheek. Slim forked a roan horse.

"How come, boss?" he asked.

"You got spooked over the trouble we had with January. You drew your pay and high-tailed." Ison's smile was a sly one. "That's what it's supposed to look like." He stopped abruptly, frowned, and asked Slim: "You reckon anyone in this part of the country knows Tombstone Bates' two-fingered hand?"

"He ain't never been this far north, boss," Slim said. "Why?"

"I've got a job for Tombstone. You know where to find him?"

"At Charley's place in Wagon Mound."

"Can you get down there and have him back here again before dark tomorrow night?"

Slim thought a moment. "That's a hell of a ways. But if I had the money for a couple spare horses I could make it."

Ison reached into his pocket and took out a wallet and leafed out some paper money, handing it across. "I'm dependin' on this, Slim. If Tombstone asks any questions, tell him he'll be workin' for good pay. Another thing, have him wear his Sunday suit."

SLIM NODDED and pocketed the money. "Where'll we meet you?"

"At the East Fork line shack. Keep out of sight and be there before dark." ...Ison turned to the others... "Duke, you and Ben are to be ready to swear in the mornin' that I rode in to the layout with you tonight and went straight to bed. You get it?"

The man whose shins had been skinned said, "Sure, boss," and the other grinned and drawled. "For a hundred and fifty a month I'd say you walked out from town on your hands."

"I'll be gone a couple hours," Ison told them. He wheeled his black gelding and struck out on a line taking him south from the trail. At a hundred yard's distance, he glanced back over his shoulder to see Slim on his way back to town, the two others going on.

In the next forty minutes he crossed the unfenced and poorly grassed range that extended far to the west of Sands and all the way to the limits of the Basin. Clumps of *chamisa* and sage and mesquite along with a few stunted cedars and ragged bunches of prickly pear dotted the rolling land, turned a sombre gray in the faint starlight. Ison rode fast, skirting most of the countless dry washes, crossing a few, always keeping to his southwesterly direction.

He came to a low rim that cut a crooked line from north to south across the range. The country beyond lay a lower level. He spent two minutes finding a way down off the rim and from grama-grass range. He rode the line of a fence until he came to a wagon-road, which he took south; and at that point cottonwoods and willow-brakes marked the line of a stream a hundred yards or better to the west of him.

Once, two miles beyond the place he had turned into it, he swung wide of the road to circle a small ranch-house that sat near the creek-bank. Less than a mile below that, the trail turned abruptly in toward the stream. Ison followed it, fording the creek and riding in past a corral, a barn, and then up a low knoll to a poplar-log cabin that squatted on its crest.

He reined in close enough to the cabin's door to lean out from the saddle and pound on the panel. No answer came from inside. He knocked again, harder, and this time his voice boomed, "Pace!"

The warped sash of the cabin's one window grated up and the octagonal

barrel of a rifle poked through the opening and gleamed faintly in the starlight. A suspicious and sleepy voice growled, "What you want, Ison?"

The ramrod reined out so that he could see the window more directly. "What's the matter, Pace? Spooky?"

Pace snorted angrily: "I asked what the hell you want?"

"Things are shapin' up, Les. January and Frank Tarbe are over with Uhling. They sent me after you. It looks like Uhling's buyin'. He took out a loan at the bank today."

There was a brief silence, until at length Pace said in thinly-veiled sarcasm, "Next you'll be tellin' me I've been picked to run for governor."

Ison replied hotly, "What good would it do me to run a sandy on you? I told you from the beginning that if you'd start a dicker with a sheep outfit you'd sooner or later get your price from Uhling. Hell, is it my fault it's taken so long to work out? You're gettin' your price now."

"January's sellin'?" There was more conviction in Pace's tone now.

"That's what I said, ain't it?"

"I'd give a nice piece of change to know what you're gettin' out of this, Ison."

"You're gettin' your nice piece of change to keep your mouth shut," Ison's glance all at once narrowed. "Have you told anyone about this? Tarbe or any of the others?"

"When I give my word I don't break it," came Pace's slow answer. Then, after another pause in which his suspicions were made clear, he said, "All right, I'll come along."

"And bring along that telegram you got today," Ison said quickly. "The boss wants to be sure he isn't layin' out his money for nothing."

THE RIFLE-BARREL disappeared and the window-sash fell heavily and Ison reined over toward the door. Pace could be heard moving about inside. In less than two minutes the door swung open and a stooped figure appeared. Pace had a rifle in the crook of his right arm. He stood motionless on the slab step beyond the door, his left hand reaching back and still holding the latch ajar. He eyed Kip Ison sourly, saying, "Damned if I know why I should take your word for this."

"You got the telegram?"

Pace nodded, pulled the door shut. He took two steps out into the yard. Kip Ison's hidden right arm suddenly lifted from his side. His hand fisted his .45. The weapon swung into line and exploded in a burst of sound. The bullet caught Pace with one foot lifted to make the beginning of a frantic lunge back toward his door. It drove him backward and he bent double. The Winchester slid into the dirt, and his hands clawed at his chest. He fell heavily on one shoulder, rolled onto his back and his body straightened out, poker-stiff. His muscles had relaxed in death before the echoes of the shot died out along the willow-brakes up-stream.

Ison dropped his weapon back into leather. His glance clung to the dead man for a good ten seconds. Then he turned the black and trotted the animal down out of the yard and into the creek. He rode the stream for three miles north, until he came to the point where the main trail from town, striking west, crossed it. There he reined his horse from the uncertain footing of the gravelly creek-bed. Fifty minutes later he was climbing in between his blankets in the end room of Simon Uhling's sprawling L-shaped adobe ranch house.

JANUARY was barely beyond Frank Tarbe's place, a mile above Pace's, when the racketing echo of the single shot sounded out of the distance. He had been walking his chestnut for the last mile and now he spurred the animal into a quick trot and swung into the bend of the trail that would take him across the creek.

He saw Pace's outstretched shape when he was halfway up along the face of the knoll toward the cabin. He reined in immediately, and his hand swept aside the flowing tail of his coat and drew the .38 from holster. His eyes scanned the shadows in under the low eaves of the cabin and ran on to the unrelieved obscurity around the shape of a stunted cedar twenty feet away; he glanced below,

to the willow-brake. A full quarter minute he sat there, his tall body tense, listening. Then he swung aground, and with the weapon still in his hand, he walked on up to where Pace lay.

The faint starlight failed to bring out the details clearly. He circled the body and went to the cabin's door, throwing it open and stepping immediately aside. When he moved in it was to take a quick step through the opening and lunge to one side of it. In another ten seconds, in which he heard no sound, he was reaching into a pocket for a match. He palmed the match and, using an over-hand motion, threw it far out onto the floor. It's impregnated end burst into flame, momentarily lifting each detail of the small room out of darkness. Ed's hasty but sure glance brought enough relief so that he holstered the Colt's. The room was empty.

He found a lantern hanging on a nail near the door and took it down and lit it. Outside once more, he made a hasty circuit of the cabin, scanning the ground for sign. Before the door again, he saw the clear hoof-marks of Ison's pony outlined in the hard-packed and sandy clay. But further out there was more hoof-sign, a lot of it. So he ignored it, striding over to set the lantern on the ground and kneel beside the body.

Pace's grey shirt was blood-matted, one small hole centering the red-stain. Ed didn't touch the body, but his glance took in each detail—the Winchester lying almost within reach, the twisted grimace of pain etched on Pace's thin still face. The eyes were open, staring; he gently closed them.

As he took his hand away, a voice from near at hand said levelly, "Lookin' for something, January?"

Ed acted purely on instinct in the next split-second. He recognized Frank Tarbe's voice. From his crouch beside the body, he gathered his muscles and made a long leap out of the lantern's glare, right hand flashing his six-gun out of holster as he moved. He landed spraddle-legged, facing the direction out of which the voice had come, his .38 cocked and at his hip. But no target was in sight.

Tarbe's laugh came softly to him: "It won't work, January. Drop that hog-leg or I'll let air through you!"

Ed realized then that his lunge hadn't quite carried him beyond the lantern's circle of light. He made a perfect target. And Frank Tarbe, in with Pace on this sheep deal, had no love for him.

So he let down the hammer of the six-gun and dropped it at his feet. A moment later Frank Tarbe stepped out of the deep shadow beyond the bushy cedar thirty feet away, a Winchester .30-30 half raised to his shoulder.

Tarbe said, "Kick that iron across here," and stood where he was until the Colt's came sliding through the dust to within ten feet of him. He picked up the weapon and thrust it through the waist-band of his Levis, and then came to stand beyond the body, opposite Ed.

He glanced briefly down at the dead man, then regarded Ed and asked, "What were you lookin' for?"

"Trying to get an idea who killed him."

TARBE WAS a man of Tom Gault's general build, short but of more ample proportions. His face was softer than Gault's, features rounded and loose jowls hiding the line of his jaw, and now as he smiled wryly the habitual serenity of his face was wiped out. "Why did you do it?" he queried.

Ed said, "You're short on brains, Frank, but not this short. It doesn't add up."

"It does to me," Tarbe drawled. Then, musing aloud, he went on, "You were inside lookin' for something. You didn't find it or you'd have cleared out. Instead, you came out here and had your look at Pace. It must be here, whatever it is." So saying, he knelt alongside the body and went through the pockets of Pace's vest. His hand came out of one pocket fisting the yellow envelope of a telegram.

He held it up, looking across at Ed. "This it?"

"You think it is, don't you?" Ed drawled.

"I don't think, I know. Les promised this sheep buyer he'd have you ready to sell with the rest of us. How in hell

he thought he'd swing it is beyond me, but that's what he did. You found out about it in town tonight and rode out here to settle with him. But why kill him for that? Because he wouldn't show you this?"

"I like to keep my hand in, Frank," Ed's tone was thin-edged with sarcasm.

Tarbe picked up his rifle, stood up. He walked over to Ed's chestnut, swung clumsily into the saddle. "My mare's down by the creek," he said. "You can ride her in to town. She's old and fat enough to discourage any ideas you might have of gettin' away."

An hour and twenty minutes later, Frank Tarbe was pounding at the door of the sheriff's small white frame house at the edge of town. Ed January stood beyond, near the railing of the porch.

Milo Peers finally opened the door. He had pulled on trousers over his flannel night gown. His thin head of hair was mussed, his eyes were heavy with sleep and he was barefooted. But when he saw who it was his eyes opened wide.

Tarbe said, "Customer for you, Milo," and motioned Ed in through the door.

Peers had lit the lamp on the small room's center table before he looked at Ed and allowed himself the comment, "I thought I was rid of you for the night. What's wrong now?"

"Frank can tell it."

Tarbe did the talking. He had heard the shot, had hot-footed it out to the corral for his mare and then ridden down to Pace's. He'd seen Ed go into the cabin and come out later and make a circle with the lantern and then kneel alongside Pace. It seemed that Ed was looking for somthing, probably the telegram.

Tarbe handed the telegram to the law man. "Read what it says. Pace showed it to me this afternoon."

Peers unfolded the yellow sheet of paper, glanced down at it. Then he turned to January, said, "Well, did you do it?"

"It's supposed to look like I did."

"That ain't what I asked. Did you?"

"No."

Tarbe laughed drily and put in. "Hell, I caught him, didn't I?"

Peers turned to the Basin rancher and snapped irritably, "I'll handle this, Frank." Then, to January: "Why did you ride down there tonight?"

"To see Pace. To tell him he was wastin' his time tryin' to get me in on the sheep sell-out."

"And he was dead when you got there?"

Ed nodded.

THE SHERIFF tossed the telegram onto the table, queried, "Have you read it?" and caught Ed's slow shake of the head and added, "Maybe you ought to."

Ed glanced down at the yellow sheet, read, *Lester Pace, Sands, Arizona. Arrive Sands evening train Thursday. Congratulations on bringing January around. Expect to close with you immediately. E. J. Dunn.*

Ed looked across at Tarbe, said, "So this is what I was lookin' for?"

"That's the only answer. Pace let it get around town today that he was bringin' that buyer in here. Only he didn't say what else the telegram had in it. You heard about it, knew he'd promised something he couldn't deliver. So you went out there to tell him it was no use. He argued with you, maybe tried to throw down on you with that rifle. You let him have it."

"And why was January there ten minutes afterwards, when you rode in?" Peers asked bluntly and with a sense of fairness that surprised Ed as much as it did Tarbe.

Tarbe pointed to the telegram. "Huntin' for that. He wanted to know what else Dunn had to say."

"That's a might thin reason for swearin' out a warrant for murder, Frank."

"Enough reason for me, Milo."

The law man sighed wearily and gave Tarbe a scornful glance. He began, "There's times when even sheep would be a blessin' compared to..." and then broke off and shrugged his stooped shoulders and pulled open a drawer of the table to take out a pair of rusty handcuffs.

As he closed them about Ed's wrists, he said, "I've hated your guts about as bad as I can remember ever hatin' any man's, January. But I'll

give you the credit of the doubt this time. I don't think you'd murder a man."

"Then why hold me for it?"

Peers shrugged, ill-humor once more taking possession of his face. "Frank said he'd swear out a warrant, didn't he? And I've took an oath to a certain duty. This is part of it. We'll let a court decide."

"You're damn right we will," Tarbe put in.

Peers snorted. "At that, you'll be safer in jail than out when Uhling hears about it."

CHAPTER 3 The Bargain

MILO PEERS' deputy rode in at the Flying U before six that morning with the news of Pace's death and Ed January's arrest. He asked for a buckboard and the loan of a man to help take the body in to town. When Uhling and Kip Ison rode out the trail, headed for Sands, the deputy was eating a hurried breakfast in the bunk-house with the rest of the crew.

Simon Uhling didn't make it a habit to air his thoughts, and for long minutes he rode in stolid silence alongside his foreman, their ponies at a reaching mile-eating trot and both men standing in the saddle. Uhling looked his part, cattle-king of this vast range. He was medium tall, white-haired and with a hawkish sun-blackened face that bore a stamp of rugged strength and toughness. His blue eyes for the past half hour had been sharp-lighted in anger. He was crowding sixty years, yet he sat the saddle erectly and without a spare ounce of flesh on his frame.

"Any idea how we can handle January?" Kip Ison ventured to ask finally. He laughed and added, "I'm not a hell of a lot of help, am I? That ruckus last night ain't much to my credit."

"We'll go at it a different way today," Uhling said. "I've spent thirty years building up a name in this country. Maybe I can use it to some advantage."

He said nothing further until they had covered another mile and ridden through the low line of hills that formed the western rampart to the Basin. As the trail took them down the slope and opened out a wide view of this four-mile-wide stretch of good grass, Uhling growled, "Damned if I'll stand the stink of sheep in the wind every time I ride through here. I'll buy January out if it takes my last dollar. It'll crowd me to borrow more from the bank, but I'll do it if I have to."

Ison frowned, obviously framing in words a thought occurring to him. "Why not wait and let January stand trial and hang for murder? His spread will be up for auction after that. You can buy it at your price."

Uhling shook his head. "He's no murderer, Kip. He'll never hang for this, much as I'd like to see it."

"Then why not take that thousand I offered you a month ago? Use it along with what you've got, to buy his place. You don't need his layout. Fill out the deed in my name and I'll take the spread over, sign a note and pay you back your money with interest. A man has to make a start some time. This is my chance to own my own brand. You'd be doin' me a favor."

"You seem to really want that spread, Kip."

"Sure, I want it. I ain't got any complaint on what you're payin' me and no man was ever better treated in roddin' an outfit. But it's time I took out on my own."

Uhling thought a moment, finally nodded. "You're right, Kip, I don't need it. And you'd make me a good neighbor." He wasn't looking at his ramrod, and didn't see the mixture of relief and cunning in Ison's eyes.

At eight o'clock that morning, Milo Peers led Tom Gault down the corridor between the jail's two pair of cells. He stopped at the end one on the street side, Ed January's, and unlocked the door and handed in a bundle wrapped in newspaper, announcing gruffly, "Here's your things." He locked the cell door, asked Gault, "You want to talk to him?" and when Gault nodded he turned and left them, going back into his office and locking the jail door.

THE BUNDLE contained Ed's everyday work clothes. He began

removing his white shirt and hard collar, the broadcloth suit, looking out at Gault to say, "Any man who'll wear one of these outfits is out of his head. They're just cousin to a straight-jacket."

Gault looked in at him for a long moment in silence, the expression on his freckled face one of faint anger. Finally he said drily, "You don't *have* to tell me about it."

Ed explained briefly what had happened the night before. When he had finished, Gault said, "I warned you. You laid yourself open to it."

"I wouldn't have missed it, Tom. Now they're playin' a tune I can dance to."

"They? Who's 'they'?"

Ed shrugged his wide shoulders as he pulled on a faded blue cotton shirt.

Galt apparently saw that his questions weren't netting him much, for he said warily, "Anything else you need? Tobacco, papers, cards?"

"You could hunt up a hacksaw and a file. Peers hasn't been as sour as usual. Maybe he'd let you pass 'em in to me."

Gault ignored this banter. "I can break you out of here," he said seriously. "But it'll have to be damned quick, before Uhling and Ison hit town. And we'll both have to high-tail out of the country."

Ed shook his head, for the moment serious. "I'll stick around. Whoever framed me with this wants me in here. I aim to find out why."

"Damn Peers!" Gault said explosively. "He's got a head on his shoulders. He knows damned well you didn't do it. Is he in with the rest against you? Why would he take Tarbe's word for a thing like this?"

"He's in the middle, like I am. He has to serve any reasonable warrant and he has to think of his votes."

"Which means Uhling?"

Ed nodded.

Gault reached to a shirt pocket for a sack of tobacco dust. He shifted the makin's from it, passed it in through the bars to Ed. As he rolled the paper into a tight cylinder and tongued the edge, he announced, "Helen Atwood's on her way over here to see you." He caught Ed's puzzled frown, explained, "The red head you spotted in the restaurant last night. Only her hair's brown, not red."

"To see me? Why?"

Gault shrugged. "She wouldn't say. So I ordered a breakfast and told her to bring it on over. Maybe Peers will let her in."

As though in answer to his words, the jail door swung open and the girl of the restaurant, carrying a tray covered with a clean napkin, came down the corridor ahead of Milo Peers. The sheriff had a half belligerent, half respectful, look on his face as he unlocked the cell door and handed the tray in to Ed.

"This here's Bill Atwood's daughter," he told Ed. "Says she wants a talk with you." He locked the cell door again and then stood there waiting, obviously wanting to know more about this.

Ed's glance was on the girl, who seemed slightly embarrassed at having intruded. Her blue and yellow printed gingham dress revealed subtly the lines of a tall and graceful figure. Reddish-brown hair framed an oval face that seemed at first very pretty and then as being hauntingly beautiful. Her eyes were a deep blue and their expression was now touched with a measure of confusion.

She said haltingly, "I wanted to talk with Mr. January . . . You see my father wrote me about him, Sheriff . . He was . . . well, he was one of dad's best friends."

It was the law man's turn to be confused. He said, "Go right ahead. Call when you're through and I'll let you out." He turned to Gault. "You stayin'?"

Ed said, "Yes," and waited until Peers had gone out before he told the girl, "Tom and I are partners," making it clear to her that Gault shared his confidence.

She nodded to indicate the tray of food and told him, "You'd better eat while it's hot, Mr. January."

Ed set the tray on the cot and came back to the cell door. "Bill called me Ed. I'm hopin' it was a family custom. We'll forget the food. I can eat any time."

SHE laughed pleasantly, her voice richly musical. "Ed it is then." She

seemed to sense that he was waiting for her to explain further, and went on, "Dad mentioned you in his last letter. You saw a lot of him, didn't you?"

Ed glanced quickly toward Gault, then back to the girl. "Bill didn't see a lot of anyone. He liked his own company. But he'd stop in at the layout maybe once a month or so. Tom and I usually packed out his grub from town. We brought some stuff out for him a day or so before I went on my trip. He was prospecting the hills in back of my place."

The girl nodded. "I know. He wasn't very sociable. But he did consider you one of his best friends." She paused, seeming to consider something before she added, "You'll have to take my word for this. I burned the letter before I knew what had happened."

Tom Gault shifted nervously, scraping his boots along the stone floor. Ed asked, "What was in the letter?"

"Several things I couldn't understand. He seemed excited. He wrote about coming to St. Louis and taking me out of school. I was in college there, you know. He said we'd go east for a long vacation, that at the end of another year he'd be able to give up prospecting. He spoke of having a surprise for me."

Ed let the silence following her words drag out for several seconds. Then: "You think Bill had run onto something?"

She nodded, her glance grateful. "I'm sure he had. Dad was a pessimist. He'd been at this game too long to build hopes on something that wasn't pretty real. Yet he left only six hundred dollars. I . . ."

"It shouldn't be hard for a good man to go up there and find out where he'd been working," Ed interrupted. "Of course, we'd see that you had claim to anything he uncovered. We knew he was lookin' for gold."

"It's not that," she put in hastily. "It's that . . . it's that I don't believe he died accidentally."

Ed's glance sharpened. Before he had the chance to speak, she went on, "I've been up into that canyon. I've looked the spot over on the hunch that both dad and his mule wouldn't trust a weak trail. That ledge isn't broken. Whatever . . ."

Her words ceased as the hinges of the jail door squeaked and the panel swung open. Peers stood in the doorway. Beyond him January could see Simon Uhling and Kip Ison in the office. The sheriff said, "Time's up, Miss."

Ed told the girl, low-voiced, "Keep in touch with Tom. We'll go into this." Then, louder: "You can leave the tray here and pick it up at noon."

Helen Atwood went along the corridor and out the door. Gault shot Ed a significant glance before he turned to follow her, and said loudly enough for the law-man to hear, "I'll be on the walk out front in case they gang up on you."

Peers stepped aside to let Gault pass, and then Uhling and Ison were following him back along the corridor.

As he stopped before the barred door of Ed's cell, Uhling's voice intoned flatly, "Milo, you're to witness this."

He turned to look in at Ed then, half a head taller, heavier, and with a complacent smile on his rugged face. Ison wore a six-gun in plain sight in a holster at his thigh. Uhling's coat bulged at the armpit where it covered a shoulder-holster. Peers, his gaunt face paler than usual, leaned against the door of the cell opposite, his manner plainly nervous and uncertain.

Uhling said, "I'm here to settle this thing once and for all, January. Either sell me your layout, today, or hang for murder!"

Ed drawled, "You'll have me bawlin' in a minute, Uhling."

"Sell to me and I'll have you out of this jail tonight," Uhling went on, ignoring the sarcasm. "I'll buy you out by paying Peers to tear up that warrant. He'll keep his mouth shut and give you time to get clear of the country. If you don't sell, I'll see you stretching a rope if I have to plant evidence and bribe a judge and jury to bring it about!"

Ed said, "I hope you're takin' all this in, Milo."

THE SHERIFF made no comment. His manner betrayed no emotion.

In a sudden burst of what seemed cold anger, Ed said, "Uhling, use your brains. You know me better than this. You may have me where you want me, out of the way. But so long as I'm in jail, there's not one damned thing you can do to make me sign over my layout! Let me out o'here, sit down with me and talk this over like a white man, and maybe we'll get some place."

Uhling frowned, trying to follow Ed's reasoning. At length, he said, "You mean if we turn you loose you'll sell?"

"Try it and see."

Uhling shrugged; turned to Peers. "Let him out, Milo. We'll go into the office and talk his over."

Peers' look clung sharply to Ed a moment. Then he came across the corridor and got out his keys and swung the door open. Ison stepped out of the way and over next to Uhling.

Ed said, "This is more like it," and thrust his hands in his pockets and sauntered out the door.

He stepped around it, close in to Ison. All at once he threw himself to the side, ramming Ison hard with his shoulder. His hands came out of pockets and as Ison's gun-side turned toward him he snatched the weapon from the ramrod's holster.

He slashed downward with the heavy forty-five and the blow caught Ison on the side of the head. Ison slumped to the floor. Ed swung the weapon on Uhling and Peers. "Reach! Both of you!" he said. Uhling ignored the warning, stabbing his hand in under his coat-lapel. Ed whirled in behind him and pinned his arms in behind him and lifted him bodily as a shield against Milo Peers' up-swinging Colt's.

His left held Uhling's two arms locked behind him. His right fist was low at the rancher's side, holding Ison's blunt-nosed .45 on the sheriff. Uhling tried to kick back with his spurs and catch Ed on the shins, but Ed's feet were spread wide apart and his hold had Uhling helpless.

Ed said, "Drop it, Milo!"

The law man studied his chances, saw that he had none, and let his weapon clatter to the stone floor. There was no fear in his eyes but a faint excitement showed there. It was as though he inwardly felt a grudging admiration for Ed.

He said tonelessly, "You sure pick the hard way, January! I wasn't sure about you before. Maybe I am now."

Ed ignored him, reaching over Uhling's shoulder with one hand to get the rancher's gun from below his armpit. He saw that Ison was moving, trying to push himself up to a sitting position and shaking his head to steady his reeling senses. "Drag Ison into the cell, Milo," he told the sheriff.

Uhling said in a voice hushed by his impotent rage, "Don't, Milo!"

His words were barely out before Ed let go his arms, put a hand at the middle of his back, and pushed him headlong in through the cell's door. Uhling stumbled and went to his knees, rising quickly and whirling around and taking one step back toward the cell-door. But Ed January's weapon was centered at him.

"You next, Milo!" Ed said. Then, when Peers hesitated, he added hotly, "Are you goin' to make me belt you one too?"

Peers breathed, "Damned if you wouldn't!" and sullenly stepped in through the door.

Ed backed over until he stood behind Ison. He glanced down at the ramrod, saw that Ison was having all he could do to hold himself up with his arms, and said to Uhling, "You ought to get a new understrapper, Uhling. This is twice he's fumbled it." He came across to swing the cell door shut and lock it. He threw the keys in the cell across the corridor.

Uhling said in a voice he was barely able to control: "You're makin' it easy for me, January. Now I can run you out of the country and keep you out. I'm puttin' a price on your head."

ED LAUGHED. "Not before I've had my fun, Uhling. Right now I'm headed out to your place. If you break loose in time, you may sight the smoke on your way home."

Uhling breathed a choked, "You wouldn't!..."

"The hell I wouldn't! I'll ruin you as sudden as you thought you would me. I'll burn your barn and touch off your hay-stacks. I'll fire your house. If there's time left, I'll butcher a steer or two and drag 'em into your water-holes. You'll have bought my place twice over by the time I pull up stakes and drift."

He wheeled, stepped around Ison, and walked out the jail door and swung it shut after him. A five-second search in the office located his own .38 and holster in the bottom drawer of the sheriff's desk. He threw Ison's and Uhling's weapons into the waste-basket at the wall and belted on his own. Then he heard glass fall from the cell's one window and Simon Uhling's shout go out along the street.

Pushing open the screen door, he saw Tom Gault hurrying along the walk toward him. Behind Tom the walk was clear for a distance of forty feet. Crossing the walk toward Uhling's palomino horse tied at the hitch-rail, he told Tom in a low voice, "Beat it! Meet me in the loft of the livery stable tonight."

He vaulted the rail, jerked loose the reins and swung into the palomino's saddle. As he turned out into the street, ramming his spurless boots into the palomino's flanks to lift the animal into a hard run, a six-gun exploded in a stacatto bark behind him. One bullet whipped the air along one cheek; the others were wide, for Ed reined the pony from side to side as he flashed out past the stores and in under the over-hanging cottonwoods. He put the horse across the dirt walk, ran the depth of a vacant lot and made the alley. Beyond the last house he swung back onto the west trail and let the palomino have its head.

Twenty-five minutes later he was thanking Simon Uhling for his love of fine horse-flesh and reining in a badly blown animal for the twisting in the trail that would take him down off the rim and into the Basin. Far behind, barely in sight, the horses of the pursuing posse laid a smoky line of dust across the horizon.

He trotted the horse the mile to the banks of Brush Creek. A hundred rods beyond the stream he rounded the high shoulder of a hill and abruptly left the trail. His last glance behind, to the rim, showed him that the trail was clear. A quarter mile to the south, still hidden from the rim-trail by the hill, he put the horse down the steep bank of a deep wash and came out of the saddle. He threw the reins around a thick finger of sandstone rock that jutted from the bed of the wash and climbed back up the bank, taking off his Stetson and sitting so that he could see the line of the trail where it cut straight into the west beyond the hill.

In the next ten minutes he built and smoked a cigarette. The morning glare of the sun was making it uncomfortably hot. When he had flicked the butt of his smoke into the sand behind him, he could hear the muffled hoof-pound of the oncoming posse. In another half minute they suddenly appeared from behind the shoulder of the hill. Simon Uhling and Kip Ison led the fourteen riders, with Milo Peers trailing a good hundred yards behind the last man, well out of the boil of dust the others kicked up.

Ed smiled at that sight of Sands' sheriff. He wondered how much Milo had guessed, for he saw the law man looking to right and left, paying scant attention to his posse up ahead. Perhaps the sheriff knew that his threat of burning out Uhling was all bluff.

FINALLY when they were out of sight beyond a far rise, Peer's spare figure the last to disappear. Ed January slid down the bank and spent five minutes unlacing the rawhide thongs that held the stirrups and letting them down a notch to suit his long leg-reach. Then, in the saddle once more, he climbed the palomino up the far bank of the wash and made a wide circle back toward Brush Creek, fording the stream a full mile below the point where the main trail crossed it. Two hundred yards east of the stream he rode into the deep-rutted wagon-road he had traveled last night and turned down it toward the lower end of the valley.

He swung wide of Frank Tarbe's place and at the turning the road made to head in toward Pace's layout he stopped at sight of a buckboard and two men working in the yard before the cabin. He quickly reined into the concealment of a low-growing clump of cedar, and from there watched Milo Peers' deputy and Uhling's borrowed crewman load Pace's tarpaulin-wrapped body into the bed of the buckboard. Later, as the team of bays trotted past pulling the buckboard, Ed was behind the crest of a knoll less than fifty yards above the road.

With the buckboard finally out of sight, he crossed the creek and rode up to the cabin and spent ten minutes in futile search for some tell-tale sign that would give him anything to work on in guessing who had done the killing. Even the hoof-prints he had noticed near the door by the light of the lantern last night were now obliteratetd by fresher hoof and boot-prints.

Without having found anything to help him, he at length struck south from the cabin, keeping to the west bank of the creek. He followed the willow-brakes of the stream some five miles, and there rode in between climbing rock walls that formed the beginnings of a canyon.

Twenty miles to the south, beyond a tangle of uptilted barren hills and rocky buttes, lay a broad expanse by a heat-shimmering and purple line of high mountains. This canyon into which the thin trickle of Brush Creek emptied made a twisting line down through the badlands all the way to the desert.

At mid-day Ed was halfway the length of the canyon. In ten miles its walls had taken on a sheer height of some two hundred feet and here, around a sharp turning, he came abruptly within sight of a high railroad trestle spanning the canyon, the timbers crisscrossing the chasm to look like the web of some giant spider. On the east side, high above the twin lines of steel entered the black maw of a tunnel.

He came out of the saddle at the mouth of a narrow brush-filled offshoot of the canyon fifty yards short of the trestle footing. He tied the palomino in the shade of a mesquite thicket. Nearby, he scooped a hollow in the sand and stretched out in the heat-relieving shade of a juniper. In two minutes he was asleep.

CHAPTER 4 Follow A Hunch

ED WAS awake an hour before sundown. He looped the palomino's reins over the saddlehorn, slapped the animal across the rump and watched while he trotted off up-canyon.

It took Ed ten minutes to climb to the high built-up right of way that led from the trestle to the tunnel. He saw immediately that its steep sides and the narrow road-bed wouldn't suit his purpose. He looked beyond and through the hundred-yard-long tunnel that cut through the high pinnacle hill of solid rock, deciding he might find a better place at the other end. He walked through the tunnel and met the same obstacle there, a narrow and high road-bed that left no room to either side so that a man might find secure footing alongside a moving train. Another trestle spanned a shallower gorge on this side of the hill. Beyond, the rails cut through a steep-sided V-shaped cut out of the shoulder of a low and rounded rise.

In the end, he climbed up the side of the steep and rocky slope to a point directly over the tunnel, where he worked down low enough so that he judged the drop to be no more than eight feet. He waited there.

Dusk was thickening the shadows in the gorge below when he finally caught the labored panting of the locomotive coming into the up-grade on the other side of the hill behind him. He heard the rumble of the heavy trucks as the train crossed the long span of the trestle, then the muffled pound of the exhaust as it entered the short tunnel.

In another quarter-minute the locomotive emerged suddenly below him, engulfing him in a blinding cloud of sooty black smoke. When the smoke had cleared enough for him to see

what lay below again, the second coach of the train was slipping halfway out of the tunnel. He jammed his Stetson hard down on his head and jumped.

He landed hard, and with his momentum against that of the train, his feet were swept from under him and he fell backward. For one interminable moment he thought he would roll off, but then his reaching hands closed over the rounded ventilator ridge of the coach roof and held on. He rode that way across the hundred-foot drop of the trestle. When the train finally slid through the notch in the hill beyond, gathering speed, he got to his feet and walked gingerly to the front end of the car and climbed down onto the platform between the cars.

He met the surprised conductor immediately inside the door of the coach, and paid him eighty cents, his fare in to Sands, explaining, "Never trust a horse not to run away on you while your back's turned." He had an amused chuckle as his answer and then went down the aisle between the two rows of green-plush seats, studying the faces of the passengers in the swaying light of the kerosene lamps.

The faces were mostly weather-burned, those of men and women and children of this country. Some were gazing out the dust-grimed windows, others were asleep, heads rolling gently to the swaying of the car's motion as the train held its scant speed on a second long up-grade out of the badlands.

He lifted the newspaper off the face of one man in a dark suit, said, "My mistake," as the passenger opened his eyes and glared balefully up at him. He went on, didn't find the face he was looking for in that car, and crossed the platform at the rear and went into the next coach. In the third seat to the left he saw a man outfitted in an expensive suit of blue serge and a clean white shirt. The man's face was pallid compared to those of the other passengers. Ed approached the seat, said, "Mr. Dunn?" and sat down when he received an answering nod.

"I'm Ed January," he announced as he faced Dunn, the sheep company buyer. "Thought I might be able to save you some trouble. It's about that wire you sent Pace. I wanted to talk to you about it. Town's a bad place for me lately, so I decided to meet you on the way in."

DUNN SEEMED all at once to place him. He smiled and said pleasantly: "Glad to meet you January. Not that I should be. You've held us up from the beginning."

"That's just it, Dunn. Pace lied to get you in here. I'm not selling."

Dunn straightened against the cushion, a flush of anger riding into his face. "You're not!" he blustered. "Then why did Pace promise me? I've spent good time and money to make this trip."

Ed shrugged his shoulders. "I understand all that. You can fight it out with the rest of them, Frank Tarbe and the others. But Pace is dead. He was murdered last night."

Dunn's look changed to one of incredulity. "Pace dead?" he echoed.

Ed lifted his long frame out of the seat and stood in the aisle to say, "That's only the beginnin'. You'd have a war on your hands if you brought sheep in here. But the main thing is, my spread isn't for sale. So get yourself a ticket back to Tucson and forget the whole thing."

Dunn said feebly, "But why wasn't I informed about this? Why?..."

"I'm sorry about that," Ed said, and turned to go. Then a thought made him hesitate, and he told the sheepman, "In case anyone meets you, I'd consider it a favor if you didn't mention seein' me."

Dunn made no answer, seeming too bewildered to find one. Ed went on down the aisle and out the car's rear door. This coach was the end one of the train and Ed stood braced against the railing on the platform. The rhythm of the iron wheels over the rail gaps clicked shorter-spaced as the train made the top of the grade and left the badlands behind to cut a straight line across the level stretch of prairie toward Sands. In the next few minutes the light along the jagged horizon to the west faded in a dying blaze of bright orange, and soon it was night with the myriad stars winking

down out of the heavens. The air had a brisk chill in it now.

Forty minutes later, Ed swung down off the train as it rattled past the loading pens, below Sands station. He skirted the corrals and crossed the road beyond them and walked in through a vacant lot and to the alley that backed the stores. Once he froze into the shadow of a woodshed as the back door to a store opened and a man came out to dip a pail of water from a barrel that sat less than ten feet out from where he stood. Further along he had to stand motionless in a narrow aisle between two buildings as a pair of riders walked their horses down the alley. Finally he let himself in through the gate of the horse-corral behind the livery-barn and walked soundlessly toward the dark rectangle of the barn's huge rear door.

A light buggy halfway along the center runway hid him from sight of the hostler, who sat back-tilted in a chair against the wall of his office close to the doors up front, a lantern hanging from a peg above his head. Ed climbed the ladder to the loft. Loose-piled hay stood knee-deep above the ladder. Ed whistled softly.

Immediately he heard a rustle of sound further toward the front, and Tom Gault's voice spoke in a hoarse whisper from up there, "It's about time."

A match flared alight and Ed walked over to where his friend stood near a mound of baled alfalfa, the expression on his face one of mixed relief and tension. The match's flame died out, and Tom said, "Where'd you go?"

Ed told him, and Tom listened in silence, saying when Ed had finished, "You believe in goin' to a lot of trouble to have a five hundred dollar reward posted on you."

"Uhling?"

"Who else would it be? Him and Ison and Milo Peers had me on the carpet for a whole hour late this afternoon. Wantin' to know where you'd gone, what Helen Atwood was talkin' to you about this mornin'."

"Who wanted to know that?" Ed asked sharply.

"They all did."

"But who thought of it first?"

TOM TOOK a long moment to give his answer. "Damned if I remember." Then, more irritably, "What does it matter who thought of it first? You'd better be thinkin' about gettin' a fast horse under you and makin' it across the desert tomorrow."

"This is important, Tom. Try and remember. Who asked about Helen Atwood?"

A longer silence this time. "It was either Uhling or Ison, I don't know which," Tom mused. "All I know is that after they finished with me, Ison went across to the restaurant and talked to the girl."

"Did she tell him anything?"

Tom said, "Hunh-uh. I asked her about it when I went there for supper. You think one of them framed you?"

"I'm too hungry to think," Ed answered after a moment. "Any chance of your bringin' me a meal?"

"I can try," Tom said. Then, more urgently, "Ed, pull out of this. Let me sell the layout and you get across a state line until I've wound things up. Hell, there's a dozen places you could get a new start with the money Uhling will lay on the line."

"Back at it again?" Ed drawled. "You ought to know me well enough to quit that talk, Tom."

Gault swore under his breath and came down off his perch. Ed said, "Take your time about bringing the food across. First, go to the hotel and see if Dunn's registered. Find out if Frank Tarbe and his bunch are in town to meet him. When you go to the restaurant, ask the girl if she can turn her place over to her cook and take the day off tomorrow. I'd like to take a sashay up that canyon where old Bill died. If she wants to come, tell her to be across here about five in the morning. I'll borrow a couple of horses for the day."

Tom said angrily, "You'll fool around until you slip your head in a noose. Who cares how Bill Atwood cashed in? You tend to your own knittin'."

"Ever follow a hunch, Tom?"

"Not your hunches. They're good for too much trouble. If you hadn't

met Ison last night you wouldn't have had Uhling in the open against you. If you hadn't gone to Pace's, they'd be making someone else the goat. I'd say your hunches stink."

"There's two ways of looking at it, Tom," Ed drawled, and added, "Try and be back in an hour."

Tom was gone better than an hour. During that interval, Ed heard the high double doors of the stable roll shut below, and later the muted creak of the hostler's cot from the office. He climbed over the high mound of baled alfalfa and looked out the dusty front window and down onto the street, seeing that the walks were practically deserted; the town had turned in for the night, with only an occasional straggler homewardbound along the street. While he stood there he saw the lights go out in the windows of the *Gem* and knew the time to be eleven, for Pinto Mundorff was punctual in closing at that hour. A few minutes later, he caught Tom's low whistle far back along the loft and went back there to take the pail of food his friend had brought him.

While he ate the tasty hot stew with the spoon he found inside the pail, Tom told him, "She'll be over at five, earlier if you want. She's stubborn as you are. Says she knows her old man was murdered. She's even made a guess as to why. If Bill Atwood found all the gold she thinks he did, he could have bought this range out twice over."

"She might be right at that."

GAULT snorted in derision. "But why worry yourself with her troubles?"

"Here's why. Old Bill died in one of the canyons north of the layout, you say, which means it was on my land. Besides that, someone wants my place, who we don't know. Couldn't the..."

"The hell we don't. Uhling wants it. The sheep outfit wants it."

"All right, answer this. Why would an honest bunch of cattle raisers, Pace and Tarbe and the others, ever get the idea of sellin' out to sheep? Who gave 'em the idea? No one of 'em would have got it by themselves, and no sheep company is goin' to pay more than their places are worth... more than they could get from anyone else."

"Then what's the answer?"

"Whoever started this... and I don't know who it is... wants to either crowd up the price on the Basin to more than Uhling's got or he wants me out of the way. Why I'm not sure. But if Bill was killed and didn't die a natural death, then we can be damned sure he knew something he should't. Whoever killed him wants my place. The same gent framed me with Pace's murder to drive me out."

"It may be Dunn who wants it."

"Dunn's never been in this country," Ed said. "This is his first trip here."

"Well, at least he's decided to stay," Tom said. "He's registered at the hotel and he sent a man down here to hire a rig to drive him out to the Basin tomorrow. It'll have the be an orewagon, from what they say about his size. He must be the biggest thing that ever walked on two legs."

"Big?" Ed echoed. "He's about your size, not so heavy."

"Hunh-uh. You're talkin' about the wrong gent. They say..." Abruptly Tom broke off, then asked quickly: "Who the hell was it you saw on the train?"

"Dunn."

"You talked to the wrong man."

"No. He knew all about Pace, about me. He was Dunn all right."

"Then who's the fat gent at the hotel that says he's Dunn?"

"You guess. I'm tryin' to."

Tom was silent a moment. Then: "You sure about this, Ed?"

"Plenty sure."

"Then what does it all add up to?"

"It's a cinch no man would claim he was Dunn unless he was getting something out of it. We've got to find out what that something is. Tom," Ed went on with excitement edging his tones, "this may be the break we've needed. A man that isn't what he claims to be settles down at the hotel and gets ready to do business on buying the Basin. You've got your job cut out."

"What?"

"Get a room at the hotel. Watch this fat gent. See if he's got creden-

tials of any kind. Let him know who you are. You say he's hired a rig to take him out to the Basin tomorrow. All right, offer to drive him out there, to show him around. Get real friendly with him. Tell him you know how to get in touch with me. See how much he'll offer for my layout."

"Then what?"

"Maybe I'll see him and use a little persuadin' to make him talk. I'll be back here tomorrow night to see what you've found out."

"You mean you may get back. I wouldn't bet either way."

Ed ignored Tom's skepticism, and said after a moment, "Wonder what happened to the real Dunn?"

"What's your guess."

"That he's playin' a two-handed stud game with Les Pace about now...unless he stayed in the train and went on through."

CHAPTER 5 Dead Man's Hand

E. J. DUNN, vice-president of the Middle Arizona Sheep Company, got off the train with three other passengers. After his brief but potent talk with Ed January, he was still undecided about what to do. The first thing, of course, was to wire Tucson and explain the circumstances. By noon tomorrow he'd have an answer and know what the others thought about his staying and making any further effort to buy out the Basin.

He was halfway across the platform, headed for the telegrapher's office, when a deep-toned voice behind him said, "You Mister Dunn?"

The sheepman turned and faced a short individual of ponderous proportions. The fat man wore a neatly-trimmed Van Dyke beard, his dark serge suit was shiny at the seams and the trousers showed no sign of a crease. His flowing black tie hung down over a shirt that had once been white but was now slightly greyed and dirty where it sloped out across his expansive paunch.

But the loose-jowled face wore a genial smile that was reflected in an amused pair of dark brown eyes, and Dunn answered politely enough, "That's the name."

The fat man extended his hand, saying, "Allow me to present myself. Horace J. Appleby, attorney at law. I represent Lester Pace."

Dunn took the outstretched hand and was surprised on grasping it to feel that the two middle fingers were missing. But the fat man's grip was hearty and he didn't seem annoyed at Dunn's obvious and sudden embarrassment over his maimed hand, so Dunn said, "Glad to meet you." He frowned then, went on: "You mean you did represent Pace. I understand he's dead."

The fat man nodded. "Unfortunate, most unfortunate," he said a trifle pompously. "But that needn't interfere with your purchase of his property. I hold full power of attorney."

"And what about January?" Dunn asked.

The fat man seemed startled, but said easily enough, "I can help you with that, too. Here, sir,"...he reached out and took Dunn's cowhide suitcase..."let me carry this for you. We'll have to walk to the hotel."

His manner was so affable and disarming that Dunn forgot his understandable misgivings and followed him around the far corner of the station and along a cinder path that led through a vacant lot to the street. Dunn remembered his intention of sending a telegram but decided finally that he would wait until morning and act on what information the lawyer could give him.

They were halfway between the station and the line of shadowy trees that marked the street when Dunn caught a whisper of sound behind him that might have been a man's boot slurring against the cinders. He looked back over his shoulder. He had a quick vision of a man's tall shape almost close enough to reach out and touch. Then the downwhipping blow of a six-gun handle crushed in the top of his skull and his hands made a feeble effort to rise and he slumped backward into his assailant's arms, dead before he could cry out.

"Take his legs," said the man who had struck the blow. The fat man shifted Dunn's cowhide suitcase to his good hand, wrapped his arms

about the dead sheepman's legs, and they carried him out across the vacant lot and along the road skirting the siding and finally into the end pen of the long line of cattle-corrals.

Two saddled horses stood hip-shot and tied to the top bar of the corral. The fat man said, "Hurry it, Slim! Get his papers."

Slim went through Dunn's pockets, handing up a sheaf of papers, some small change and a gold watch, and finally a fat wallet. The fat man pocketed everything. They worked in silence, lifting the dead man and throwing him across the saddle of one of the horses as though this had all been prearranged.

"Go ahead and get up the street," Slim said, and started lashing the body to the saddle with a length of rope.

The fat man picked up the suitcase and left the corral, hurrying out across the vacant lot and then down the dirt walk of the street. He stopped in front of the first lighted store-window he came to and took Dunn's papers from his pocket and hastily examined them. He put the watch in his vest-pocket and then went on, slowing his wadding stride as he came in sight of the hotel. He smiled a little at hearing the coughing pound of the train as it pulled out of the station.

HE WAS climbing the hotel steps, when Kip Ison, sitting in a chair alongside Milo Peers on the veranda, said, "That must be him, Sheriff. Better tell him."

Peers got up out of his chair and came over to the head of the steps, asking, "Are you Dunn, from Tucson?"

The fat man nodded, smiled, held held out a hand. "E. J. Dunn, Sheriff." He looked down at the five-pointed star on Peers' vest.

The law man took the hand reluctantly, receiving the same uncomfortable shock Dunn had had on noticing the two missing fingers on the fat man's hand. "We've got a disappointment for you," he said. "Your friend Pace died yesterday."

"You don't say! Sorry to hear it," the fat man said, his face showing the proper amount of surprise. "Who's managing his affairs?"

"No one, yet," Peers said. "But there's more bad news. Ed January isn't sellin' his place. That is, it's doubtful if you'll be able to see him. We had him in jail under suspicion of murderin' Pace. He broke out. He's gone."

The fat man's face reddened: "Then I've had this trip for nothing?" he flared. "Why wasn't I informed?"

"There ain't been time," Peers said mildly. "This all happened in pretty short order."

Ison, who had sauntered over to stand behind Peers, said, "There's a train back to Tucson in the mornin'."

The fat man's angry glance whipped over to Ison. "I'll remember that," he said curtly. Then, to Peers: "I'll want your help, sheriff. I'm going ahead with this buying whatever land is for sale in the Basin. If necessary, we'll lease a driveway through January's place to get to our summer graze."

Ison laughed softly. "You think you will."

The fat man glared at Ison a moment, then ignored him and picked up his suitcase and went in through the door. He registered and the clerk took him upstairs to a room at the front end of the hall.

Two minutes later the fat man had his vest and coat off, collar unbuttoned, and was sitting in a rocker with his feet on the room's center table, examining the papers he'd taken from Dunn's pockets and several more that came out of the suitcase.

One interested him particularly. It was a letter of credit on a Tucson, bank, to the amount of ten thousand dollars, and was signed by Dunn. After examining it a long moment, and staring vacantly at the wall beyond the table for a longer one, the fat man abruptly took his feet down and crossed to the door and locked it.

Back at the table again, he found a rusty pen and a near-empty bottle of pale blue ink in the drawer. He sat down, uncorked the ink, and started writing *E. J. Dunn* over and over again on the back of an envelope, comparing his efforts with the signa-

ture on the letter of credit. As he worked, a beady perspiration came to his broad forehead.

His penmanship at first bore no similarity to the signature he was trying to copy. But when both sides of the envelope were filled with his tightning scrawl, after he'd filled one side of a blank sheet of paper he found among Dunn's possessions, his writing bore a fair resemblance to Dunn's. Finally it bore a close one; at the end of a forty-minute interval, it was near-perfect.

He was hunched over the table, paunch folding out over the edge and hard at work when a knock sounded at the door. A trace of panic came to the fat man's beady eyes. He hastily folded the scrap-paper and the letter of credit. He got up out of the chair, thrust the papers into his pocket, put the ink and pen back into the drawer, and went over to unlock the door.

WHEN Kip Ison edged into the room, the fat man was smiling blandly.

Ison closed the door behind him. "Nice work, Tombstone," he said, laughing softly. "The sheriff took it whole-hog."...He crossed to the table, saw Dunn's papers and picked them up..."Find anything interestin' on Dunn?"

Tombstone produced the wallet, handed it across. "Just this. There's enough there to get started on."

Ison counted the money and when he looked across at Tombstone his dark brows were gathered in a frown. "No letter to the bank?"

Tombstone shook his head. He took his coat from the back of the rocker beside the bed, fished a few more papers from the inside pocket and tossed them to the table. "Nothing to the bank here."

Ison's inspection of the papers didn't ease his frown. When he had finished, he counted the money in the wallet. "This'll have to do us then. There's only a little over a thousand here. Go to a lawyer in the morning, get him to make you out some sixty-day option forms and then get on out to the Basin. See Frank Tarbe first and get him to take you to the others. Pay a hundred for each option, no more."

"What about this Ed January?"

Ison thought a long moment, said, "Gault will be around town. Get acquainted with him and make him an offer. He'll see that it gets to January sooner or later. If we make it hot for January he'll have to let his spread go. And by now he hates Uhling's guts bad enough to sell out this range to sheep. Uhling's offered him five thousand. You're to offer six for a quick sale. We'll use Dunn's money for a down-payment. I'll arrange the rest through the bank."

"And what comes then?"

"He'll make the deed over to you. You're to practice on Dunn's signature and be able to write it well enough to pass it off at the recording office, when you sign it over to me. You'll get your pay and get out after that. Disappear. We'll let those other options go."

Tombstone smiled and said, "Damned if you haven't thought of everything, Kip. What's behind it all?"

"You're not drawin' your money to ask questions," Ison drawled, regarding the fat man pointedly as he crossed to the door. "But if we pull this off without any slips, I'll put you wise to something that'll make every dollar you can lay your hands on grow one hell of a big family." He started to open the door, but paused to add: "I won't be in until noon tomorrow. See you then."

Ison used the alley door in leaving the hotel. His black gelding was tied to a cottonwood two hundred yards out in a pasture that ran back from the outbuildings beyond the alley. He made a wide circle to the west trail and an hour and a quarter later was riding down on the grove of poplars and an orchard that marked Uhling's ranch headquarters. It lay at the foot of a grass-blanketed hill several miles beyond the western edge of the Basin. He walked the last hundred yards in to the layout, circled the wagon-shed and went certainly through the darkness to what appeared to be a mound of earth near the orchard fence. It was a root cellar, and he pulled open the stubborn hasp to the sunken door as soundlessly as he could and went

inside. He used one match to locate a small keg in one corner.

He tossed the match aside and lifted the keg and hefted it. Then he went out of the cellar, closed the door, and walked back the way he had come. On the ride back to town, the keg made an awkward and unsteady weight balanced across his thighs. But he was in no hurry and took his time, finally riding in under the same cottonwood in the pasture behind the alley. He turned down the alley in the direction of Helen Atwood's restaurant.

CHAPTER 6 "Talk Fast"

ED WAS awake at four-thirty the next morning, seeing the first faint grey light of dawn through the murky window at the front of the stable loft. He stood up in his make-shift bed of hay, stretched, and stepped over to the window to look out onto the street.

Faintly visible blue smoke was coming from the chimney at the rear of Helen Atwood's restaurant. There was a light behind the drawn shade of the window of her second-floor room. Ed was all at once impatient to be started, realizing that the hostler in the livery-office below would be awake before long.

He climbed across the mound of baled alfalfa, went down the ladder and felt his way through the darkness to the saddle-rail halfway along the runway toward the front of the barn. As quietly as he could, he carried first one saddle and then another to the small door set in the closed larger one that opened onto the corral out back. Once a cinch-ring striking a bare steel stirrup made a sharp sound in the stillness to bring the hackles rising up along his neck. He stood motionless a full minute, breathing shallowly, listening for a sound from the office. None came, and only when he had the saddles on the ground beside him in the corral did he breathe easily once more.

He picked two good horses, a bay and a clayback, and had them saddled and hidden in a deserted barn behind a vacant house far out toward the edge of town before it was light enough for him to clearly distinguish objects more than fifty yards away. That done, he went back along the alley and started along the passageway between the feed-barn and the neighboring building, heading toward the street so that he could watch for the girl.

He was halfway the length of the passageway when a sudden concussion beat the still air. A fraction of a second later the muffled thud of an earth-jarring explosion ripped away the early-morning silence. He broke into a run and came onto the street in time to see a pluming fog of smoke and dust dotted with falling debris above the rear of Helen Atwood's restaurant. A woman's shrill scream turned his blood to ice as he raced on across the street and along the side of the restaurant toward the alley in back.

The main building of the restaurant was a two-story affair, a room on each floor, the lower one serving as the lunch room, the upper as Helen Atwood's living quarters. Adjoining the rear was the thin-walled frame kitchen directly flanking the alley.

Running toward it, Ed saw that the side wall of the kitchen was now a mass of out-thrust and splintered boards, most of them torn in two. He had to push aside two boards to edge through the narrow space and into the alley. And from there he could see the gaping hole in the kitchen's rear wall, the litter of dented pots and pans inside, pieces of jagged iron that had once been the stove, the sagging and broken tarpaper roof and the zinc sink twisted out of shape and lying in a far corner.

But the thing that held his attention the longest was what appeared to be a bundle of bloody rags lying in the open doorway to the lunch room; that and the down-thrust and jagged ends of broken planks that had once formed a stairway leading up out of the kitchen to the girl's room above.

He stood there for long seconds, in a paralysis of stark fear, when all at once he heard Helen Atwood's voice call frantically from above, "Ling! Ling, where are you? Are you all right?"

Then two things happened so

quickly that Ed acted on instinct alone. First the kitchen roof, unsupported now, gave way and crashed into the wreckage in a smother of dust to give him a fleeting glimpse of Helen Atwood, alive, drawing back out of the doorway of her upstairs room. Next, at the limits of his vision, he saw a shadowy figure come through the gate of the picket fence behind the hotel. He turned and ran back along the alley and in behind a lean-to in time to keep from being seen.

HE WORKED his way back behind the outbuildings and into sight of the restaurant again to see George Clevenger, night clerk of the *Plains House,* lean a ladder against the rear wall and call up to Helen Atwood, "He's dead. Thank God it wasn't you, Miss!"

Before the girl had climbed down the ladder, the sound of men running along the street and alley warned Ed to move away. Satisfied that Helen hadn't been hurt and relieved to think that he hadn't given away his presence here, he went back to the loft of the stable to wait. On his way in through the rear door he noticed that the front ones were open now, that the office door stood open. The hostler had evidently joined the crowd gathering across the street in the alley.

From the window of the loft, he saw men cross and re-cross the street, going in through the front of the restaurant. As the first full light of the morning sun slanted down the street almost an hour later, a group of people moved out of the restaurant door and formed two lines out across the walk. Four bare-headed men emerged from the restaurant doorway, carrying a large oblong box between them. In the box, Ed decided, was the crushed and torn body of Ling, the Chinese cook who had served the last three owners of the eating establishment.

The next two hours dragged endlessly. Ed remembered the two horses tied in the deserted barn at the edge of town and decided he'd let the hostler make his own guesses on where they were. He might need one of them later on, and the barn was as good a place for them as the livery corral. He stood at the window trying to get a glimpse of Tom Gault. Dozens of men he knew came and went from the restaurant; he saw Milo Peers and Helen Atwood several times. Then, as the glare of the sun was making the heat in the loft close to unbearable, he had a momentary glimpse of Tom Gault hurrying down the opposite walk.

Half a minute later, Tom's head was appearing through the ladder-opening to the loft. His friend was out of breath and had a worried look on his face.

Before Ed could put the question uppermost in his mind, Tom was saying, "I got here as quick as I could. Get set for a jolt, Ed."

"I saw part of it. It was supposed to be the girl instead of the Chinaman, wasn't it?"

"That's the only thing it could be. She gets up every morning and has the fire built by the time Ling gets to work. Only this morning she'd asked him to come early. He built the fire. Something in the stove blew it clean to hell, him along with it. I couldn't eat my breakfast thinkin' about it."

"Has Peers any ideas?"

"He don't say much...except that you might have been mixed up in it."

Ed said, "For a while there it looked like Milo was part human. Now I'm not so sure. When this is all over, I'll have a few things to say to him."

"All over!" Tom said bitterly. "Hell, it'll never be over, not for us anyway. First it's Tarbe and Pace against us. Then Uhling and his understrapper. Now the sheriff's put in his oar. And there's Dunn."

"The fat man? What about him?"

"You tell me. That's why I took so long gettin' here." ...Tom ran his bandanna over his perspiring face and let out a sigh... "I can't get next to what he's doin'. I watched him like you said. He was in the crowd over there at the restaurant for awhile. Then he went across to the bank when it opened. He went straight to old man Jessup's office and was in there a half hour. I asked a few questions

and found out he was cashin' a letter of credit or some such thing from a Tucson bank. He left the place with ten thousand dollars Jessup gave him. From there, he headed for the station. He's down there now."

"On his way out?" Ed's look was sharper now.

TOM SHRUGGED his shoulders. "He didn't check out at the hotel. His grip's still in his room as far as I know. Maybe he's down there waitin' for the morning papers to come in. There's a train due in twenty minutes."

"We know he isn't Dunn. If you'd just cashed a letter of credit that wasn't yours, for ten thousand dollars, what would you do?"

Tom said, "I'd get the hell out of here."

"And with every man, woman and child in town across the street looking over the restaurant, it wouldn't be hard to leave without being seen, would it?" Tom's blunt face took on a frown. "What're you drivin' at?"

"That we'd better get down there and have a talk with our fat friend."

"And get caught doin' it?" Tom laughed dryly. "Can't you get it through your thick head that there's about three hundred people around here who'd jump at the chance of collectin' the reward on you? You're done here, Ed. You don't dare show yourself."

"We're not licked if we can make this gent talk, are we? All I know is he's not what he claims to be. If we can throw a scare into him and make him talk we'll..."

"And how're you goin' to make that barrel o' guts give up what he knows?"

"We'll see," Ed said. "Get down there to the station and tell him who you are. Tell him you've found me and that I'm ready to sell. So long as he says he's Dunn, he's got to act interested. I'll be waiting down below the station by the water tank." Ed started toward the loft opening. "I'm not takin' much of a chance."

Tom let out a gusty sigh and grunted, "If you wasn't runnin' a chance you wouldn't be doin' it. But go ahead. I've done all I could to stop you."

TOMBSTONE paced restlessly along the station-platform, trying to hide his uneasiness and getting more nervous each minute. Each time he came to the end of the platform he'd look out along the cinder path that led to the street to see if anyone was coming. He lit a cigar, and he was fond of good tobacco; but right now the taste was flat and bitter and he threw the cigar away after only two drags on it.

He was hot but didn't dare remove his coat because of the spring-holster he was wearing at his arm-pit. Time and again he took off his flat-crowned hat and wiped the perspiration from his face and head. In five minutes' time he looked at his watch, Dunn's watch, twice and each time shook it and put it to his ear to make sure it was running.

Finally he went to the open window of the ticket agent's office and asked, "Where the hell's that train?"

"I told you she was late, Mister. Be here in ten minutes."

Tombstone resumed his pacing. From time to time his maimed hand, the two middle fingers missing, would edge up to feel a bulge along his coat-front made by an object in the inside coat-pocket; this gesture seemed to reassure him each time, but only momentarily.

Tombstone saw Tom Gault turn from the street into the station-path and come along it. He stopped his pacing and waited for Tom's approach with his eyes taking on the hard flintiness of mixed suspicion and wariness. Then, when Tom came straight up to him, every muscle in his ponderous frame was tense and cocked and his face set in a bleak scowl.

"You're Dunn, ain't you?" Tom queried.

Tombstone nodded.

"I'm Gault. I hear you're lookin' for January."

Over his relief, Tombstone said, "I was. Why?"

"I located him for you. He's waitin' up the tracks a ways."

Tombstone's eyes mirrored a momentary indecision. Then he said hurriedly, "I'm through here, giving the whole thing up. I shouldn't have made this trip. And I won't have any dealings with a wanted man."

"But if January'd sell, it'd square things, wouldn't it?"

Tombstone saw it coming, said angrily, "I tell you I'm through. I don't want anything more to do with this."

"But Ed's ready to pull out, Dunn. He's got his deed. He'll let the layout go for eight thousand."

Tombstone shook his head. "It's too risky."

"Why?"

Tombstone had to hesitate a moment to think of an answer: "Because we can't use the Basin. There's too much trouble connected with it!"

"You're singin' a different tune than you were to Pace. What's a little trouble to a big outfit like yours? You've got crews hired for nothin' else but trouble. The Basin's the best sheep-range you'll ever lay eyes on. Now that January's comin' around, you got a chance you'll never see again. Better take it."

Tombstone half turned to look out along the sun-glinting ribbons of steel that cut a straight long line to the far horizon. He felt an immediate relief in seeing the train, an inch-long black worm, crawling with painful slowness down off the horizon.

Into the short silence, Tom said, "Hell, it won't hurt to talk to Ed even if you ain't doin' business with him."

Tombstone took out his watch, looked at it. "All right," he said gruffly. "I'll give him two minutes."

"It'll only take one," Tom started down the platform. "He's out here by the water-tank."

Tombstone followed, scowling darkly and eyeing Tom's back with a harried glance. They left the platform, skirted a tool-shed, and followed the line of a siding in past a string of box and flatcars and abruptly came to the weathered red water-tank.

ED STOOD leaning against one of the tank's thick timber legs. His thumbs were hooked in his belt, his lean face was hard-chiseled beneath its two-day crop of beard. His eyes were fixed stonily on the fat man as he approached.

"Here he is, Ed."

Tombstone stopped a few feet short of Ed, began, "I told Gault I didn't want..." when Ed's slow drawl cut him short.

"Easy, fat man. Save your wind. I want to know who you are, who brought you in here. And I want to know damned quick!"

In a fraction of a second, Tombstone understood what he faced. He took a quick backward step and his hand started up under his coat.

Ed pushed out from the tank-timber and swung his right hand from the back of his knees. His fist caught Tombstone on the neck below his ear. The fat man stumbled, caught himself and stayed on his feet. Ed stepped in and flicked a Smith and Wesson .44 from the holster beneath Tombstone's coat. In trying to snatch at Ed's hand, Tombstone lost his balance and sprawled heavily onto his side, his senses still reeling from the blow.

Ed tossed the six-gun in under the tank, where it splashed into the drippings that made a black pool of water in the sooty mud. "Get up," Ed said flatly.

Tombstone got slowly to his knees and then dove headlong at Ed's legs. Ed sidestepped, drove both fists in to rock the fat man's head from side to side. Tombstone fell sprawling face down.

"Get him onto his feet," Ed told Tom.

Gault stepped over to Tombstone, took a hold beneath his armpits and heaved him to his feet. Tombstone whirled with surprising speed and locked his arms about Tom's waist and bent him backward. Tom tried to jerk his arms free, couldn't. Ed drew his six-gun from holster and stepped in close and struck a blow so that the weapon's barrel caught the fat man full on one cheek.

Tombstone groaned, let go his hold on Tom and snatched at the gun. Ed hit him with a left full on the jaw. Tombstone's out-reaching hand missed the gun and he lurched sideways. Ed struck again, hard, and his knuckles wiped Tombstone's broad nose sideways. Blood spurted from Tombstone's nostrils. He backed away and hung his head and let his nose drip onto the ground. He swore softly and reached for a bandanna in his hip-pocket and put it to his nose.

Ed asked, "Ready to talk?"

"You can go to—"

Ed's fists knocked Tombstone's jaw shut and cut off the words. Tombstone staggered backward under the force of the blow, failed to get his feet under him, and sat down and slid a few inches across the gravel.

The train's whistle howled out of the distance. Tombstone heard it vaguely as he struggled to his feet again. He looked up to see Ed's back-drawn arm, cocked for another blow. "Hold on!" he gasped.

Ed's hand came down.

"What is it you want o' me?" Tombstone asked in a muffled sullen voice, speaking through the bloody bandanna he held pressed to his bleeding nose.

"Who brought you in here?"

Tombstone sneered, thought better of it and said, "What do I get if I tell?"

"You can hop the train and go as far as you like."

Tombstone considered a moment. "All right," he said. "It was Ison."

Ed's look narrowed and after a brief silence, he said, "You've made a fair start. Now tell me what happened to Dunn."

Tombstone shook his head. "I wasn't in on that. All I know is he was slugged and loaded into a saddle. Ison and Slim managed that, something about cavin' in a cutbank on him." The train whistle sounded again, much louder, and Tombstone glanced apprehensively toward the station. He said tonelessly, "I'm not missin' that train, January."

"You'll make it if you talk fast," Ed said. "What's Ison's game? What makes him so damned anxious to get my place?"

TOMBSTONE smiled wryly. "Brother, when you find out, you tell me."

"Don't you know?"

"I don't know nothin'. I was brought in here to work a few days and get two hundred out of it. All Ison's told me is that if I have any spare cash when this is over he'll see to makin' it grow a hell of a big family for me."

Ed caught his breath. "He said that?"

"That's straight."

Ed breathed in suppressed excitement, "This is it, Tom!" Then he took a step toward Tombstone, held out a hand: "Where's the money?"

"What money?" Tombstone asked blandly, backing away a step.

"The ten thousand you got at the bank."

Suddenly Tombstone wheeled about and started running. Ed stuck out a boot and tripped him and he went down, sliding along the gravel. Ed stepped up to him and was reaching in under his coat when Tombstone clamped a hold on his wrist and yelled stridently, "Help! Help!" in a voice loud enough to have carried to the center of town.

Ed hit him alongside the ear with his free hand. Tombstone ducked his head in between his shoulders but held on and bellowed once more, "Help!" with his voice carrying loudly across to the houses that backed the railway yards.

Tom was close now and said urgently, "Beat it, Ed. There'll be a mob down here."

But Ed, pulled to his knees now, was reaching back to his holster. He spun out the six-gun so that he held it by the barrel, and tapped the fat man, not hard, above his ear. Tombstone's grip went loose. Ed's hand snaked in under his coat and drew the bulging wallet from the inside pocket.

As Ed came to his feet, Tom said, "Run for it. There's people comin'!"

"See you at the feed barn," Ed said, stuffing the wallet into his hip pocket and running in behind a flat-car. He was barely out of sight when two women appeared at the back door of a house whose back yard flanked the tracks. Ed heard a man running toward him along the cinders and crawled under the car and out of sight as the station-agent came running in answer to Tombstone's cries. He crawled to the other side of the siding, found himself between two lines of freight cars and ran in toward the station. He hid behind the tool-shed while another man ran past toward the water-tank, and then sauntered casually along the platform and

around the far end of the deserted station and past it as the train rumbled in. Once beyond the station he angled off obliquely behind a line of trees and through the back yard of a house and in toward the far end of the street. His last glimpse back toward the water tower showed him a group of people gathering there.

Once Ed was out of sight, Tom looked down at Tombstone and drawled, "By God, you sure wanted that money!"

Tombstone struggled to his feet, called once more loudly, "Help!" and took a menacing step toward Tom.

Tom said, "I ain't got it, Mister. You lay a hand on me and you won't be able to climb onto that train."

Tombstone heard the train. It was close, brakes squealing as it slowed past the station. He looked frantically around him as the station-agent and then another man ran out from behind the string of cars and in toward him. Three women and two children were coming through the gate leading out of a neighboring back yard. Two other women and an old man were watching from beyond a fence close by.

The station agent came up, breathless, and asked curtly, "What's goin' on here?"

TOMBSTONE, his face purple with rage, pointed at Tom. He had to yell to make himself heard over the noise of the train. "Him...him and his partner robbed me! Go look for him, damn it! He ran in along that siding!"

The locomotive came out from behind the line of cars on the siding with a roar of escaping steam and pounding drive-wheels. The agent shouted above the riot of sound, "I just come from there. Didn't see no one." He glanced at Tom, shouted belligerently, "You know anything about this?"

Tom shrugged his shoulders and made a circular motion of his hand alongside his ear. "Drunk maybe," he said loudly. He stepped back and leaned against one of the tank supports. The locomotive ground to a stop and the roar of the steam suddenly broke off. Tom added: "Found him flat on his face with a bloody nose."

"You been drinkin', Mister?" The station agent eyed Tombstone coldly.

Tombstone looked helplessly around him. One of the youngsters who had come to look on was giggling, hand over his mouth. "Do something!" the fat man sputtered. He looked from one onlooker to the next. They were all smiling now.

Tom drawled, "You've got a train to catch, fat man."

"And I got things to do," the agent growled. He turned and walked back toward the station, in a hurry.

Tombstone's hostile glance whipped around and fixed on Tom. Tom reminded him, "These through trains never wait long at these tank towns. I'd hate to have you miss it and run into Ison. There ain't another till late this afternoon."

The locomotive's bell suddenly started its clanging. Sheer panic came into Tombstone's glance. He turned and started running up along the tracks toward the station. Tom stepped over alongside the tender and watched him. With a cough of smoke from its stack, the locomotive jerked at the train, started it slowly rolling. Tom saw Tombstone grab the handrail of the first coach and swing with an awkward lurch up onto the step. The train rolled faster. As the platform between baggage car and passenger coach came even with him, Tom raised his hand. But Tombstone had his back turned.

In the loft of the feed-barn twenty minutes later, Tom was saying in a low voice to Ed, "Hell, I just can't do it! It ain't fair to the girl."

"But I'll be there waiting. Nothing can happen to her. It's the only sure way."

Tom made one final protest. "Can't just the two of us do it alone?"

"You know how we could?"

Tom reluctantly shook his head. "All right," he said. "As soon as Ison rides in, I'll get started. But, damn it, how can you be so sure of this?"

"You heard what the fat man said, that Ison had promised to put him in the way of making some big money."

"That could mean anything."

"Not on top of what we know. Ison wants my place, wants it bad enough

so that he murdered old Bill Atwood and then Dunn and probably Pace. We aren't guessin' from here on. Bill ran into something and Ison caught him at it. The girl knew even if everyone else was wearin' blinders. What Bill found must be on my land or Ison wouldn't want it. He can file on anything north of my fence."

"And you think we have to go up there?"

"It's the only way we can get proof."

Tom shrugged his sloping shoulders and went over to the loft-ladder. "Don't fumble anything," he said. "We'd be in a hell of a fix if you weren't there in time."

"I will be," Ed said, and added: "Remember, don't tell her about it before Ison hits town. She might give it away."

CHAPTER 7 Trapped

MILO PEERS and Helen Atwood came down the walk and turned in at the jail office at two that afternoon. As soon as the screen-door banged shut Peers said in a harried voice, "Now, Helen, for the love o' God, tell me what this is all about! I can't even get a start on it until you talk. You wouldn't this morning and maybe you won't now. But I can try. Sit down."

She took the chair near the door and he the swivel chair at his desk. He pushed his Stetson far back on his head and let out a weary sigh: "First, how come Ling built that fire this mornin' instead of you? Why was he there early?"

He saw Helen's glance go beyond him, saw sudden surprise come into her eyes, and then a widening strip of light fell out across the floor from the back of the room. He wheeled around in his chair, dropping his right hand to the holster at his thigh.

His move brought him face to face with the small bore of Ed January's .38 Colt's. Ed kicked the alley door shut behind him. "Take it easy, Milo," he drawled. His eyes didn't stray from Peers as he said, "Helen, get on across the street and find Tom Gault. He's lookin' for you. He'll tell you what's up."

Helen came up out of the chair. She started to say something, thought better of it, and went out the door onto the walk.

The gladness that was in her made her obey Ed without questioning his motives. She had been worried about him and twice this morning had started across to the livery barn only to turn back on seeing that she was watched. Since then she hadn't tried again, thinking he would be gone. Just now she had a moment of panic as she saw Kip Ison and two of his men ride their ponies in to the hitch-rail in front of the hotel. She waited until Ison had sauntered on down to join the sprinkling of curious onlookers in front of the restaurant before she went on.

In the jail office, Ed was saying, "Shed the hardware and we'll be on our way, Milo. I'll feel better if you're de-horned before we start."

Peers said bluntly. "We ain't goin' any place that I know of."

Ed lifted a booted foot and kicked the swivel-chair hard. The sheriff was caught by surprise, with his feet off the floor. The chair spun halfway around before he could stop it. Ed's hand dipped in under the chair-arm and snatched the law man's six-gun from holster.

Peers swung about savagely. Ed rocked open the loading-gate of the Colt's and punched the loads out of the cylinder as the sheriff glared up at him. Finished, he tossed the gun into Peers' lap and said, "You comin' along peaceable or do I have to give you the same medicine Pinto Mundorff got the other night?"

"Comin' where?" Peers growled.

"You'll find that out. Better bring along a pair of handcuffs."

"Who says I'm goin' anywhere?"

Ed hefted his Colt's in his palm. "Milo, you're thick-headed as hell this mornin'. Do you want to find out who killed Pace, who killed Bill Atwood?"

"Bill Atwood fell sixty feet onto some damned hard rock. That's what killed him. You know damned well who killed Pace!"

Ed smiled thinly: "You're wastin' my time. Are you comin' under your

own power, or do I have to carry you?"

PEERS SAW that this wasn't bluff. He jerked the brim of his Stetson lower over his eyes and got up out of the chair. Ed leathered his weapon, took down a rifle and a handful of shells from the rack over the desk and indicated the alley door. As they went along the alley and out behind the bare yards of the first few houses, Peers said with only a trace of his customary rancour, "This had better be good, January."

"It's goin' to be."

Five minutes later they were in the saddle and riding the two livery horses west from town on a line parallel with the road that cut a straight line to the hazy flat horizon. January rode alongside Peers with the rifle cradled across his knees.

Kip Ison's first glimpse of Helen Atwood, from where he stood with the group of loungers on the walk before the restaurant, gave him a feeling of uneasiness mixed with an indefinable relief.

Last night, after half filling the ash-drawer of the restaurant-stove with black powder, he'd once or twice been tempted to go back and remove it. But yesterday when he was questioning the girl about her talk with January at the jail, she had asked him a question that added a new complication to his plans: "It was one of your men that found my father up that canyon, wasn't it? Did he say anything about that ledge?..."

She had stopped there and all his indirect urging had failed to draw out what she had been about to say. But it had been enough to plant a seed of suspicion in his mind, the thought that she knew more about her father's death than she was telling anyone... that is, anyone but January.

He had made a shrewd guess that her conversation with January concerned the subject of Bill Atwood's death. And from there his reasoning had gone on to show him how dangerous the girl could be if she ever voiced her suspicions to anyone else, Peers for instance. He had taken a direct method of removing this threat to the so far perfect operation of his plan, and had planted the powder in the stove.

Now, seeing the girl alive, his relief was immediately put from his mind by the desire to see her, and this time to find out exactly what she knew.

He left the fringes of the crowd and started out across the street to meet her. He saw her turn all at once off the opposite walk and come on across the street and go up the hotel steps. Tom Gault leaned against one of the roof-pillars at the top of the steps. She stopped and talked with Gault.

Ison sauntered on down the dusty street and over to where his horse stood at the hotel tie-rail. He took a clasp-knife from his pocket and began fiddling with the rawhide lacing of a latigo. He heard Gault say to the girl, "You go change your clothes and I'll be here in about three minutes with the horses." Then Gault and the girl came down off the steps and went along the walk and Gault crossed over to the livery-barn as the girl disappeared inside her restaurant.

When Helen reappeared five minutes later, having changed from her dress to a plain blue blouse, high-heeled boots and a pair of man's denim trousers, Ison was once more loafing in front of the restaurant.

The girl crossed the street and went into the feed-barn. She and Gault rode horses out of the barn's runway a few moments later.

Ison stood watching them go along the street and finally out of sight beneath the low-spreading cottonwoods. He was asking himself where they could be going that would take them out the west trail. Could it be to January's place to meet January, who might have had the gall to hide out and not leave the country? Or had the girl talked to Gault, and was she taking him up into the canyon where Bill Atwood had died?

A sudden impatience took its hold on Ison. He hurried along the walk to where his gelding was tied. Slim, coming out of the hotel lobby, hailed him as he swung up into the saddle. Ison waited impatiently.

SLIM CAME out across the walk with his thin face set bleakly.

"Better get a good grip on that horn, boss," he said. "Tombstone's high-tailed."

Ison stiffened, barked, "He's what?"

"Frank Tarbe was in this mornin' lookin' for him. Tarbe told the clerk inside he'd heard Tombstone had cashed a letter of credit at the bank for ten thousand. Tarbe was ready to make the deal on his place, but couldn't find him."

"Who said he was gone?" Ison rasped, his face turning livid at the mention of the letter of credit.

"No one," Slim drawled. "But if I had ten thousand in my jeans I know damn well where I'd be now. On that train that come through this mornin'."

Ison swore time and again, viciously, his anger impressing even Slim. As soon as he could get in a word, Slim said, "This is no place for me. I'm takin' the shortest way out, boss."

The tall man's words sobered Ison. He laughed harshly, shook his head and said, "Don't worry! Tombstone'd never give the rest of us away." Then, more soberly, he added: "We didn't need him anyway. Come along with me. I have a hunch we'll see this thing finished before the day's out. Where's Duke and Ben?"

"Over at Pinto's place."

"Get 'em and meet me out the trail a ways."...Ison saw the lurking doubt in Slim's glance..."There's an extra hundred in it for you if we pull this off."

"Pull what?"

"I know where to find January. This time we'll bring him in in a box. You three can split the reward."

A recognizable greed crept into Slim's glance. "Now you're talkin'," he drawled as he started across the street toward the saloon.

Twenty minutes later Ison met the trio beyond town. He didn't wait for them to come alongside but motioned them to follow and spurred his black gelding into an easy lope as they fell in behind. He ran the black for two miles, until far ahead he saw two crawling dots along the line of the trail, that were Gault and the girl. Only then did he pull in.

When the others were alongside, he motioned up ahead. "They're takin' us to January," he explained, and for the next hour and a quarter he kept his distance without losing sight of the pair ahead.

That interval took them far north, past January's layout with its small adobe house and weathered outbuildings, deep into the broken land directly below a line of high mountains. Finally they came to the mouth of a canyon that twisted upward through a long reach of barren and rocky land that ran clear to the green of the higher foothills that footed the uneven line of the peaks.

Ison reined in after they had ridden a hundred yards into the mouth of the canyon. Something had been worrying him these past few minutes; he wanted Slim and the others close at hand yet didn't want them to know what lay ahead.

He said finally: "One man can do better at this than four. Give me a five-minute start and then come along slow."

He rode on ahead without giving them time to ask him questions. The canyon deepened abruptly, the rocky floor rising yet the walls climbing even more stiffly. He nudged the long leather scabbard under his right knee, at once thankful that a premonition of trouble had prompted him to bring along his saddle-gun. Now he drew the Winchester from its sheath and rode with it across his thighs. Scarcely a hundred rods after he'd left the others, he passed the beginnings of the ledge-trail Bill Atwood had been traveling the day he met his death. The canyon twisted crazily along most of its length, so that by riding cautiously and examining the short reaches beyond each turning he could be fairly certain of riding ahead without being surprised.

OFF TO his left, along the sheer west wall of the narrow gorge, the ledge trail climbed gradually upward until it hung seventy feet above the canyon-bottom. The going became rougher, with uneven outcroppings of rock flanking the snaking dry bed of a wash that centered the canyon-floor.

Finally Ison reined in and got out of the saddle, winding the black's reins about the grey branches of a dead and twisted cedar. He left the

black there, going on toward a high shoulder of the wall that hid what lay beyond a turning.

As he approached the turning, he took off his wide Stetson and held it in his right hand, the Winchester ready to swing to his shoulder and gripped along the barrel. He edged cautiously in toward the wall and then looked beyond it at what lay beyond, sure that he'd see Tom Gault and Helen Atwood.

But the narrow reach of climbing rough ground ahead showed no sign of life. The east wall was sheer, unbroken. At the foot of the west wall lay a slanting heap of rock rubble and heaped earth directly below the ledge-trail. Here was the spot where Bill Atwood's body had been found. He had expected to find Tom Gault and the girl examining the spot. Yet they weren't there. They had gone on.

A look of cruel cunning set Ison's face in a down-lipped grimace. He tossed his Stetson aside, ran around the turning and out across the broken floor to the next bend above. If they had gone on, it could mean but one thing. They knew about the thing that had taken Bill Atwood up toward the head of the canyon, the thing Ison himself had stumbled on one day while riding through a break in January's north fence looking for strays. And if Gault and the girl knew about it, others might.

He covered the next quarter-mile quickly, cautiously, studying the ground that lay ahead before he openly crossed it. The ledge trail climbed up and over the rim of the canyon, cutting across a high mesa this canyon bordered. Finally Ison reached a right-angle turning where he used more than ordinary caution. When he stepped around it, he lifted the Winchester to his shoulder and said in a voice that boomed hollowly between the walls, "Need some help, Gault?"

Tom Gault stood twenty yards away, his back to Ison and his glance directed upward toward a narrow ledge fronting a cave-like opening thirty feet up on the sheer face of the wall. Directly below this opening was a slanting heap of tailings. Fresh earth and shards of granite rock made a conical heap against the wall. Helen Atwood, beyond Gault, was still in the saddle. She was looking above, too.

Ison's voice brought Gault wheeling around, right hand stabbing toward his waist. But the threatening bore of the levelled Winchester stayed Gault's swift gesture, and his two hands came up slowly to the level of his ears. The girl gave a low cry of alarm and stiffened in the saddle and her face lost color.

Ison said, "Take the weight off your belt and be careful about it!" and came three steps nearer so that less than ten feet separated him from Gault.

Tom's right hand came down slowly and lifted the six-gun from his belt and dropped it at his feet. He said, "Looks like Bill had been doin' some diggin' up there. That why you killed him, Ison?"

Uhling's ramrod let his face relax in a broad smile, yet his black eyes were as hard and bright as glare-ice. He nodded his head slowly. "Now I'll have to arrange another accident," he drawled.

At that instant, something at the limits of his vision made him whip his glance off to the right. The late afternoon sun was throwing the west rim of the canyon in clear outline half the way up along the east face. Ison had seen the regular line of that rim-shadow move, and now it moved again and took on a man's outline.

In the split-second he tried to think, Ed January's voice whipped down at him from the west rim behind, "Drop it, Ison! I've got my sights on you!"

Ison knew then that he had lost, for the tell-tale moving shadow had made him turn his back to the west wall. In turning, his Winchester had fallen out of line with Gault.

AND YET, sheer desperation made him lunge backward toward the vertical shoulder of rock that formed the bend in the canyon. He had taken two steps when a hard blow wrenched the Winchester from his grasp and the sharp *crack!* of January's rifle racketed down.

As he froze into inaction, his glance went above and he saw January finish levering another shell into

his weapon and line it down at him. January called, "You take him, Tom."

Gault had already snatched his six-gun from the ground at his feet and now stepped in behind Ison and rammed the blunt nose of the weapon in at his spine.

Ison saw a thing then that drove home his feeling of helplessness at this quick turn of his luck. Above, behind Ed January, another figure had come to stand looking down. Even across the hundred foot interval of distance, Ison recognized Sheriff Milo Peers' thin shape.

As Gault pushed Ison on across to the foot of the west wall, Ed said from above, "We'll need both ropes, Milo. Leave the horses where they are."

Gault said nothing during the next three minutes. Helen Atwood stared at Ison with a mixture of wonder and bright hatred in her blue eyes. She had dismounted and now stood apart from them.

High above, Ed January was tying together the two coiled reatas the sheriff had taken from the saddles of the two livery horses. Ed made the law man go down into the canyon first, looping a noose under Peers' armpits and lowering him gingerly. Peers brought along the rifle. When the law man stood with the others below, Ed tied the rope-end securely about a firm outcropping and came down hand over hand.

Where they now stood, directly below the cave-like opening, was a good thirty yards up the long shank of an L-shaped turning in the canyon. The heap of tailings that lay below the opening, was on the same side as the sheer wall's right-angle bend.

Once Ed was alongside him, Peers looked sourly across at Ison and said, "I've seen some things this past hour I'm needin' answers to, Kip. Who rolled them big boulders down off the rim over the ledge where Bill Atwood died?"

Ison made no answer, and Peers snorted and muttered, "I'll apologize for a few opinions I've had of you, January."

Tom touched Ed's arm and pointed upward with his Colt's toward the round opening in the wall: "There's your answer, Ed. Bill Atwood's test-hole, if my guess is correct. I don't know much above it, but when Ison come up on us I'd just finished lookin' at something I'd say was a piece of good picture-rock. There's a lot of it here in this muck Bill threw down." He indicated the upslanting heap of tailings against the wall, plainly the result of someone having worked to enlarge the opening behind the ledge above.

Ed wasn't listening. His tall frame had gone rigid and his head was cocked to one side and he was listening intently. All at once his glance swung down to the turning in the canyon forty yards below. He whipped his .38 from leather and snapped, "Watch it, Peers!" and lunged squarely across and into Helen, who was standing a few feet away.

The drive of his move surprised the girl and they both went down at the exact instant a gun's flat explosion came from beyond the turning.

Slim and Duke and Ben Meade reined their horses out from behind the protecting shoulder of wall that made the bend. It was Slim who had fired, and now he threw his weapon into line once more. As he fired again, Ed was rolling clear of the girl and onto his feet. Slim's bullet ricocheted in a high whine from where he had been sprawled a moment ago.

Ed's answering shot, thrown from the hip, drove Slim sideways in the saddle. The gunman dropped his weapon, made a reach to steady himself on the saddlehorn, missed his grip and slid awkwardly to the ground, hitting hard on one shoulder. But he was on his feet and behind the protection of his horse before Ed could fire again. An instant later he had run in behind the protecting wall and out of sight.

KIP ISON whirled and ran a zig-zag line for the bend. Tom, ten feet away from Ed, had jerked his six-gun up and was firing at the uncertain target Duke made on his rearing horse. Ed's gun once more added to the inferno of sound bound in by the two high walls. Ben Meade's horse went down, reared to its feet again and plunged back out of sight around the turning.

Peers was the first to be aware of

what Kip Ison was doing. He hurried his shot with the Winchester and his bullet only speeded the ramrod's frantic dive in behind the protection of the right-angle of the wall. That rifle shot of the law man's was the last, for both Duke and Ben Meade had gone out of sight. The whole thing had been a matter of a few short seconds.

Ed was the first to size things up, and it sent him running on down to hug the wall a few feet short of the turning. He threw two warning shots across to the opposite wall, then called back to the others, "Get up into the cave!" and the urgency in his voice made Tom run up to Helen and take her arm and start her climbing along the insecure footing of the pile of tailings.

As Tom and the girl worked their way upward, Ed hugged the wall and swiftly punched the empties from the .38 and reloaded. His glance whipped around from the narrow neck of exposed ground directly ahead to Tom and Helen; he was relieved only when they had climbed slowly up over the narrow small ledges that afforded hand and footholds and were on the broader ledge fronting the mine-opening. Peers was a few feet below them.

Helen had disappeared inside the opening in the wall, and Peers had handed the Winchester up to Tom and was reaching for a hold on the main ledge when suddenly a rifle exploding *crack!* sounded from the turning. Ed wheeled around in time to catch a momentary glimpse of Kip Ison darting back to cover, too late to throw a shot at the ramrod. Then, from around the bend, two guns opened up and threw lead close in to the turning. Ison's men were making certain that no one came around after Ison.

Tom had been reaching down to give Peers a hand up onto the ledge when the rifle spoke from below. He heard the *whup* of the bullet as it took the sheriff. Peers choked out a groan, his body went slack, his hand fell. Tom's hand shot down and caught the falling arm and he held on. Then, with Peers' suddenly slack weight almost pulling him off the ledge, Tom dragged the law man up beside him.

He laid the sheriff on the shelf, seeing the spreading stain of red across the shirt and vest. A hasty examination showed him that the bullet had entered the fatty muscle along the left side of Peers' back. The sheriff's face was a sickly yellow and his teeth were clenched against the pain.

"This is goin' to hurt, Milo," he said, and lifted the law man's slight body and carried him back to the tunnel-mouth.

Helen had crawled back out onto the ledge again. Tom told her curtly, "Get inside," and stooped and half dragged Peers through the opening after the girl. He could see vaguely that a low tunnel ran on back from the opening. He carried the sheriff back as far as the feeble light lasted, then laid him down and told Helen, "Do what you can for him. I've got to get Ed up here." He crawled back and out onto the edge of the ledge. He picked up the rifle Peers had dropped, and called down, "Make it fast, Ed! I'll cover you."

Ed saw that Tom had the Winchester lined down at the turning behind which Ison and his men were hidden. He sheathed his .38 and ran back the forty yards to the foot of the tailings-heap below Tom. Then something stopped him, and a moment later he was running up the canyon to where Tom's and the girl's horses stood. He picked up their reins, led them further on up and in behind a broad outcropping of rock near the west wall, and tied them as well as he could, out of line with the bend below.

AS HE came back, Duke, the short and frail-bodied crewman of Ison's stepped out momentarily to throw two shots at him. But Tom's hair-close answer with the Winchester sent Duke dodging back to cover.

In less than half a minute, Ed stood beside Tom on the ledge before the cave-mouth. He looked below. Slim's horse was across the canyon, reins dragging and walking uncertainly up to where Ed had tied the other pair. Beyond that, nothing in sight moved.

Ed asked, "Did they get Milo?" and caught Tom's answering nod of the head.

But one more thing was worrying

Ed. He stepped out and took a hasty look upward, frowning when he'd joined Gault once more. "I don't like it," he drawled. "No way out now but to go down past 'em."

He stooped and crawled in through the opening, Tom coming immediately behind. From the darkness further in, Helen called, "Can I have some light? He's bleeding."

Ed wiped alight a match along his thigh and in the fitful flickering light he saw Helen kneeling beside Peers' out-stretched form a few feet away. The law man's face looked drawn and pale. The tunnel was narrow, too low for January to stand erect. Beyond the match's feeble circle of light, the tunnel ran darkly on back and out of sight.

Behind Ed, Tom said, "Here's a lantern. And...hell, it's a rifle, Bill's."

Ed struck another match and turned. There, close against the wall, stood a lantern with a cracked chimney, a Marlin .32 rifle, a pick, two shovels and a mattock.

Ed shook the lantern, heard coal-oil slosh around in it, and levered up the chimney and lit it. Then he took the rifle, a slow smile coming to his face. He levered it open and in the lantern's light saw that it was loaded.

He turned to the girl, was about to say something, and then laid the weapon aside and bent over Peers. The law man's wound was painful but not serious, for the bullet had gone through the fatty muscle on the left side, midway between hipbone and rib-cage. As he tore the tails of the sheriff's shirt into strips for bandages, Ed said, "You must be packin' a rabbit's-foot, Milo. Two inches to the other side, and we'd be holdin' a wake over you."

"All I care about is gettin' down there and corralin' that side-winder!" Peers said. "Ed, you must have had this guessed at pretty close."

Ed finished the bandaging and leaned back, sitting hunkered down on his heels. He took out a sack of tobacco and made a smoke for Peers and one for himself, then handed the makin's across to Tom, who had just come back from another look out the opening.

He reached out and picked up Bill Atwood's Marlin rifle and hefted it in his two hands again. "We can use this," he said. "Now we're about even with 'em on guns."

Peers pushed up onto his elbows, wincing in pain as he moved. "When do we start? I can help."

Ed reached over and pushed the law man down again. "Not yet, Milo," he said. Then, glancing at Helen, he went on more soberly, "I didn't know what I was letting you in for when I had Tom bring you up here. I thought Ison would be alone."

"You couldn't have known how it would turn out," the girl said. Then a worried look came to her eyes. "What was dad doing here, working on your land?"

Ed said quickly, "We knew he was up here somewhere. I told him a long time ago he was welcome to what he found inside my fence. Now don't let that get to worryin' you." He hid his misgivings nicely, for in reality Bill Atwood had never asked permission to prospect these badlands to the north of his place. This had been as much of a surprise to him as to any of the others.

There was a momentary gratefulness in the glance Helen gave him. Then she was saying haltingly, "Can we...is there a way out?"

Tom said dryly, "Maybe, if we could grow wings."

PEERS looked up at Ed, a question in his eyes. "Is it that bad?"

Ed admitted: "Pretty bad, Milo. There's no way out except down-canyon. It's a box above, with the walls straight up like they are here!" He frowned a moment in thought, added soberly, "And in Ison's place, I'd send a man up onto the rim. One man could start enough rock down off the rim to fill over this tunnel."

"He'll think of it," put in Tom. "Three dead people aren't goin' to be able to do much talkin' against him."

They sat silent for a long moment, each experiencing the closing down of a common feeling of helplessness. Finally Ed said, "It's a long way down and up onto the rim. A man

couldn't make it before dark. It'll give us a chance to get out of here and up the canyon before anything happens."

"And what comes after that?" Tom asked.

Ed had been inspecting Bill Atwood's rifle that lay across his knees. He raised his glance and looked at Tom with a light of warning in his eyes. "You talk too much," he drawled, and Tom, understanding that Ed wanted to keep the girl from realizing fully the gravity of the situation they faced, turned and crawled back to the opening to keep a watch below.

CHAPTER 8 A Way Out

FULL DARKNESS found Ison and Ben Meade and Slim standing in the shadows below the circle of light cast by the fire they had started immediately below the canyon's turning. Better than two hours ago Ison had sent Duke down-canyon. Duke's orders were to go down as far as the ledge-trail and take it to the rim above, then to come along the rim to a point above the opening to Bill Atwood's mine that Ison had explained was a natural cave. The rim all the way along the canyon was topped by eroded and rotten rock, boulders balanced precariously enough so that a man's weight could push them over and into the canyon.

Duke's job was to be to start a slide of rock above the tunnel. Once started, Ison was working on the hunch that a section of the rim would give way and choke the tunnel-opening with tons of earth and rock.

The purpose of the fire was to make it light enough so that neither January nor Gault would try so foolish a thing as shooting their way out. Ison's confidence was running high.

Ben Meade had been nervous as a cat since Ison's shot had caught the sheriff. Slim, with his shoulder broken by Ed's bullet, didn't seem to mind anything but the pain which kept his face set in deep lines of tension. They had bandaged his shoulder as well as they could and made a sling for it. Ison had even offered to let Slim ride in to town to have the shoulder cared for. But Slim had chosen to stay, for Ben Meade was his friend and he could read the signs of Ben's nervousness clearly enough to want to be there.

Just now Ben's strangely trembling hands were trying to shape a cigarette. Slim saw this and said caustically, "First time I ever knew you to turn gun-shy, Ben."

Ben threw the paper and tobacco savagely to the ground. "Gun-shy, hell!" he muttered. He wheeled around on Ison, his temper for the moment out-riding his good judgment. "I'll stand for most anything, Kip. But I wasn't hired to fight women! Let the girl go!"

"She knows too much," Ison said. His right hand hung within finger-spread of one of his pair of .45s.

Ben was too blind-angry to see this warning signal. "Knows what?" he gritted. "None of us know a damned thing...why we're up here or why you want January out of the way! This whole play's forked, Ison!"

Slim drawled, "Kickin' about the pay you're drawin', Ben? It's more'n you ever earned before."

"I've no kick," admitted Ben, steadied by Slim's words. "But if this thing goes through, I don't want to be here to see it. That girl never hurt me, nor any of you. Either let her go or I pull out. It's a two-day ride to the Border!" He had blurted it out before he quite realized what he was saying.

Ison's hand came up in a smooth gesture that planted his Colt's in line with Ben's belt-buckle. "Not for you, Ben," he said tonelessly. "Maybe you ought to get over there behind that shelf now. Duke ought to be comin' along any minute." Ison was watching them both, not because he distrusted Slim but because Slim liked Ben and the thin man's actions were sometimes unpredictable. He flicked the weapon in his hand. "Get on over there, Ben."

They had arranged a few minutes ago to take to cover when Duke was ready above, so as to block the bend effectively in case January and Gault

should try and break out at the last moment. Ben's spot was the most dangerous, a waist-high outcropping close to the bend on the east side and full in the light cast by the fire. Slim was to wait in the shadows below the fire, where they now stood. Ison was to be waiting deep around the turning, behind the screening of a low-growing clump of *chamisa* halfway toward the dark shadow along the west wall.

WHEN ISON spoke over the threat of his six-gun, Ben didn't move for a few seconds. Only when Ison's thumb drew back the weapon's hammer in an audible click did it penetrate Ben's mind that he had gone too far. Realization drained the color from his face. He backed away, hands clear of holsters. Then he turned and walked quickly across to the outcropping, looking back over his shoulder and held by stark terror at expecting to see Ison's weapon explode at him.

Once he was crouched down behind the outcropping he realized he was no better off here than he'd been before. He was full in the light, and somewhere across there stood Ison. Even when he heard the ramrod moving over to his position toward the west wall a minute or two later, he knew that Ison could do what he pleased with him. For the clump of *chamisa* was in shadow and directly in line with the exposed side of the outcropping.

Twenty minutes later, when Duke's low whistle sounded down off the rim to let them know he was ready, Ben was vainly trying to think of a way out.

The first few boulders fell from the rim in racketing explosions that filled the canyon's narrow corridor with deafening sound. One of them sheered off a solid ledge, and it was the earth-jarring fall of the ledge's weight that shook loose a whole section of the rim. Tons of earth and rock slid downward in a mounting roar and a cloud of dust and flying small rock. The mass built outward across the canyon floor in a wave of deep toned and ominous rumbling. Then, gradually, the sound died out and all that remained was the slurring of small pebbles down the conical high mound of rubble. The tunnel-mouth was buried ten feet below the top of the mound.

A full hundred yards above the turning, Helen and Ed and Tom stood watching the settling grey fog of dust that dimmed the light of Ison's blaze far below.

Helen said in an awed, hushed voice, "I didn't believe he'd do it." Her voice was on the verge of breaking with emotion and abruptly she turned and left them, walking back to where Milo Peers sat on the saddle-blankets they'd taken from the horses. The law man was weak from loss of blood, glad to be leaning back against a low outcropping.

They had moved down from the tunnel-opening barely in time, Ed carrying Peers across his shoulders, and Tom with a rifle lined at the turning below, where the light of the fire glowed against the far wall. They had just finished making the saddle-blanket bed for Peers when Duke's signal from the rim had sounded down to them. The falling of the rim-section had held them all mute and awed, realizing how narrowly they had escaped being buried alive.

Ed now held Bill Atwood's rifle cradled under his arm. A long moment after Helen had left them, he said to Tom: "We'd better get down there. We'll take him." He started down the canyon, skirting the foot of the slide that filled the level floor to leave only a narrow, clear strip along the east wall. Tom followed him, carrying the Winchester.

"We'll have to make it stick this time," Ed said in a low voice when they were halfway along the foot of the slide. "Once we have Ison, the others will head out. Nothin' tucks tail and runs quicker'n a hired gun hand when things go against..."

The sharp explosion of a rifle from the rim above cut in on his words. Behind them, they heard the girl's voice sound in a low startled cry. Ed whirled about and had run back two strides when a second shot racketed down to them. He faced the west rim, raised Bill Atwood's rifle; a moment later, when the powder-

flash of the next shot came, he swung the rifle's sights in line with it and squeezed the trigger.

THE HAMMER clicked down with a metallic sound and the shell didn't explode. Frantically, Ed levered in a fresh shell, lined the rifle once more, triggered it. Again it missed fire. He threw the weapon savagely away and reached for his six-gun.

Behind him, Tom's Winchester spoke in a sharp cracking report. From up on the rim a hoarse scream rose against the silence. It held on, seeming to travel down the cliff-face. Then there sounded the sickening thud of a body. Small rocks rattled down the face of the slide and against the firelight they saw a shapeless body roll down to within ten feet of them.

Tom stepped down there and was back in a moment. "Busted every bone in him," he said. "It was that kid they called Duke."

Ed led the way back up-canyon at a fast walk, all at once impatient to be near Helen, yet dreading to discover what might have happened.

From behind them a six-gun exploded in a staccato riot of sound that went booming up between the walls.

"We ain't goin' to toll Ison out of there now," Tom muttered.

Helen was standing alongside the sheriff as they came up to the outcropping. She started to say something but Peers cut in, "Someone ought to brain me! I got hungry for a smoke and lit a match. Forgot about the man up there."

Helen said lifelessly, "I did it. I thought his side was bleeding again." Her voice broke in a sob and she said helplesly, "Now we'll never get out...Ed...Ed, it's just as though I'd shot you both, all of us, with my own hand!"

Ed reached out and tilted her chin up so that he was looking down into her face. "Don't!" he said quietly, in a tone that checked her sobs. "Haven't I put things pretty plain to you so far?"

She nodded, and in the faint starlight her face was touched with a tenderness that made it beautiful.

"And will you believe what I say now?" he asked.

"I'll try, Ed."

"Then wait here. I know a way out. Tom and I will be gone a while. Don't worry. If there's shooting, neither of you move out from here. We'll be back."

She smiled, a smile that eased the tension in her face. "You say it as though you meant it." Her voice was no longer trembling.

"I do mean it."

"Then I believe you. But, Ed... please...if anything should happen..." Something within her held in check the thought she would have uttered, and with a last grateful glance up at him she turned and knelt beside Peers.

Ed said gruffly to Tom, "Get the ropes from the saddles. We'll need 'em."

Tom walked off toward the spot where they had tied the horses. He was back in less than a quarter-minute, handing across the two coils of rope. They walked away from the outcropping, in toward the slide again. Tom said, "That sounded pretty straight. But I don't see how in hell you figure to get us out."

Ed didn't answer but kept on down-canyon, toward the turning. They picked their way carefully and soundlessly along the foot of the slide and almost to the canyon's bend. Tom still carried the Winchester but Ed was armed only with the .38. Close in to the turning, Ed crouched down and let Tom come up to him. Then he pointed upward along the sheer climbing face of the jutting wall.

"I remembered it while I was talkin' to her," he said. "See that rock that sticks out up near the rim?"

Tom saw what he meant; the returning outlined faintly a jutting flected light of the fire around the small finger of rock high on the face of the wall that formed the bend.

Ed went on in a voice barely above a whisper. "If a man could climb high enough along this slide, he could throw a rope up there."

Tom's glance measured the distance from the nearest point along

the slide to the finger of rock. He shook his head. "There ain't a man alive who could make that throw in the dark. It's a good fifty feet."

ED NODDED toward the turning; "There'll be a man forted up behind that near shelf. You're to open up on him when I'm ready. I'll toss a rock down."

He stood up and was about to turn away when Tom said, "Hold on! What about the drop on the other side?"

"I'll see when I get there." Ed didn't wait this time, but walked away, back along the slide. He smiled a little as Tom let out an angry whispered oath behind him. As he walked along, he tied the ends of the two reatas together.

He picked the up-canyon side of the slide for his climb, hoping the greater distance would help smother any sound he made. Climbing up over the loose rock would have been difficult in the full light of day. In the dark, it was close trained patience, not putting his weight on a boot until he was certain that the footing was solid. One hint of sound would warn Ison and his men down the canyon, and he moved as silently as a cat.

He made it at last, to the topmost crest of the slide nearest the turning in the wall. He stood thirty feet above the canyon-bottom. A full forty feet overhead, barely in sight in the reflected light of the fire, he could dimly make out the slender finger of rock that he had picked as his target. He shook out the loop in the rope.

He had one chance, and only one, and knew it for a certainty. If the snaking rope should miss the rock and fall below to start a sifting of pebbles or earth, Ison and his men would be on the alert and waiting. Tom's chance of staging the surprise would be gone.

He swung the broad loop carefully, his glance fixed above. Every muscle along his flat body was taut, ready for the flawless timing that called for the throwing of the rope fifty feet almost straight upward at a slender horizontal target less than two feet in length.

On one upward surge of his arm, he released the whirling noose. The coils snaked swiftly from his left hand. He moved his left once in a *quick flick* that sent a ripple along the slender line and seemed to give it added speed. The noose slowed, stopped, and fell slowly. It struck the very edge of the rock-finger and swung there.

Ed caught his breath, held it, and a beady perspiration moistened his forehead. He reached for the rope gingerly with his right hand and snapped it. The noose jumped, settled well in on the rock. Ed pulled the rope taut and tested it. It held his weight.

He took his .38 by the trigger-guard and held it by the forefinger of his right hand, gripping the rope with his other fingers. Then he thought of warning Tom. He stooped, caught up a pebble, and threw it far out and into the turning. Before it had started its arching all, he gripped the rope with both hands and jumped out into emptiness.

CHAPTER 9 Last Shot

HE HAD swung even with the apex of the turning around the point of the L before the falling rock struck below him with a racketing report. Thirty feet of empty air was below him. He swung beyond the face of the bend, around it, into the upper limits of the fire's light.

Behind him, Tom's rifle opened up in a burst of sound to be immediately answered by the deeper-toned explosions of Ben Meade's six-gun from behind the outcropping. Ed could see Ben crouching behind the protecting ledge of rock. He ignored him, letting go the rope with his right hand and flipping the .38 into his palm. As his swing carried him on, he went beyond the fire's spread of light and in toward the wall. Small trees and shrubs swept past far below. Then, in keen relief, he saw a talus slope break the floor's even monotony and sweep up toward him.

When he had to let go his hold on

the rope, the talus slope was fifteen feet under him. He dropped fast, and fell sprawling backward in a smother of dust. Then, as he rolled onto his feet, he saw Kip Ison's shape rise up from behind a clump of *chamisa* between him and the fire. Ison swinging a pair of six-guns into line with him.

He swivelled up the .38, hip-high, and thumbed the hammer. He was about to squeeze the trigger when Ison fired. At almost the exact instant of Ison's shot, another came from down canyon, beyond the fire. Ison's bullet tore a shred of denim from his trousers. The other, Slim's crashed hard into his left thigh and knocked him off-balance and his own shot went wild.

He fell, and as he went down he was staring into the winking powder flashes of both of Ison's guns. One leaden slug kicked up the dust beneath his falling body. The second grazed his upper right arm. Before he struck the ground he had thumbed one shot at Ison. He saw the ramrod lurch backward, catch himself and bring his guns to bear again.

Ed threw his long body into a roll, his left leg going numb from the shock of the bullet in his thigh. Ison fired once again. Then Ed was sheltered momentarily by a low-growing and scrubby cedar. He came to his knees behind it, looking toward the fire. At that instant Slim fired again, laying his bullet close enough so that Ed could feel its air-whip along his neck. He targeted the powder-flash of Slim's gun and threw two shots over there, and then lunged to his feet. He ran dodging from side to side deeper into the shadow beyond the fire, Ison's gun speaking once off to his left.

At last the darkness hid him completely. As he reloaded the .38, he looked around. Far across there, Ben Meade lay sprawled face down, his body half exposed from behind the outcropping. Tom stood in the turning, barely out of line with Ison's guns, his Winchester held ready.

Ed called stridently, "Back, Tom!" and moved to one side immediately, looking toward Ison's hiding place behind the *chamisa*. But Ison didn't make himself a target by firing again.

The .38 re-loaded, Ed walked stealthily back and in toward the wall. He knew where Ison had been a moment ago. Yet with the clump of *chamisa* between him and the fire, he could look in between its slender branches and see that it hid no one.

HE STOOD still, breathing shallowly, trying to catch a hint of sound. His thigh was pulsing in pain and each move of his left leg sent a knife-like pain up into his hip. He ignored it, waiting for Ison's next move which he knew wouldn't be long in coming.

It came suddenly, the rattle of a dry cedar-stick striking the wall almost immediately behind him. Ed stood motionless, waiting. Then, almost within reach to his left, Ison's solid bulk loomed out of the darkness, back toward him.

As deeply as he hated this man, Ed couldn't bring himself to squeeze his trigger at that exposed back. He took one step in, rammed the snout of his .38 hard against Ison's spine, and drawled, "Drop 'em, Kip!"

Ison stiffened for a fraction of a second. Then he kicked out with his left boot in a vicious swing that carried him away from Ed's gun and sent his sharp spur ripping up along Ed's shin in a red-hot lance of pain. Ed swung vainly, in an attempt to club the ramrod over the head. He missed and the force of his blow carried him forward off-ballance.

Ison fired both weapons, in his frantic haste hurrying his shots. One bullet took Ed in the thick neck-muscle above his left collar-bone. The other ripped the cloth of his loose-hanging vest at his right side. Then, only four feet separating them, Ed squeezed the trigger of the .38 with the weapon centering Ison's wide chest.

Ison staggered back, his two thumbs working back the hammers of his .45s. He coughed blood, yet his feet were spread wide and held him erect. His guns swung down. Ed's Colt's exploded once again. A hole suddenly centered Kip Ison's broad forehead. His head tilted back, his hands clawed open and his guns fell

to the ground. His wide, high frame went loose and he fell forward inertly, his right shoulder striking Ed's arm and pushing him aside.

Ed let his gun-arm fall to his side. A fuzziness was blurring his sight. He shook his head to clear it, and that motion brought up a pain in his shoulder that weakened him and nearly blotted out his senses. He sat heavily alongside Ison, head down. It took the strength of both arms to fight off the weakness and keep from falling on his face.

He was dimly aware of Tom striding up and lifting him to his feet. He heard Tom say in mock cheerfulness, "Hang on, Ed. It's all over."

Ed couldn't summon the voice to answer, and when Tom threw him over his shoulder he gritted his teeth against the pounding pain gently.

The next hours passed in a haze of semi-consciousness and unreality. He halfway knew that he was lying close to a fire, and once he tried to focus his eyes on a moving shape near him he thought he recognized as Helen's.

In the greyness of the full dawn, iodine stinging in the open wound of his shoulder finally cleared his head. Old Doc Milford, was kneeling alongside and staring down at him saying, "Thought that might turn the trick."

"It'd feel better if you cut it off, Doc," Ed said, wincing at the pain.

He looked beyond the medico to see Helen and Tom and Simon Uhling standing close by. Helen and Tom were smiling down at him. An expression of bewilderment was all he could catch on Uhling's narrow face.

He lay quietly while Milford finished bandaging his shoulder. When the doctor got to his feet and said, "He's too tough to hurt much," and walked away, Ed asked Tom "How's Milo?"

Tom nodded his head toward the other side of the fire. "Haven't you heard him? He's riled because we didn't let him in on it there at the last." He smiled broadly and looked in some embarrassment at Helen, and said to her, "Hadn't you ought to tell him?"

SHE NODDED, her bright glance not leaving Ed. Tom turned and took Uhling by the arm and led him away.

Helen came over and knelt beside Ed. For a moment she sat silently looking down at him with a smile of tenderness on her face. Then she asked in a soft voice, "Do you feel like talking, Ed?"

"Sure. But first, how did Uhling and the doctor get here?"

"Tom rode in after the doctor when we saw how bad that shoulder was. They must have sent the word out to Uhling from town. He's already asking how he can make it up to you and he hasn't been here two minutes."

"And Ison?"

"They're burying him here in the canyon...along with the others."... A bleak look touched her oval face for an instant and then was gone... "But there's something else, Ed. Tom remembered how that rifle of Dad's missed fire when you tried to use it. While the doctor was bandaging your leg, Tom and I went up and got it and had a look at it. We found this poked down the barrel." She held up a tight cylinder of grimy paper. "The firingpin was filed down to keep it from firing."

"What is it?"

"You remember that I said it was queer dad was working inside your fence? And you lied to me and said you'd told him he could?"

Ed insisted, "That wasn't a lie. I..."

"Let me read it," Helen interrupted. "It says, *'Whoever gets this, tell Ed January I'm sorry it had to be this way. I knew I was on his land but I wanted to make sure before I told him about it. Ison's had me cornered in here two days. I'm taking my best rifle and trying to make it back to Ed January's. So long, Helen.*"

Ed took a long moment to get the full implications to old Bill Atwood's message. He said finally, "I knew I couldn't be wrong about Bill. That's like him...not wantin' to bank on anything he wasn't sure of."

Helen nodded. There was a moistness in her eyes she fought against.

Yet he saw that a tiredness that had been in them a moment ago was gone now.

"Sort of makes us partners, doesn't it, Helen?" Ed went on, a little confused as he looked up at her. The light was stronger now and laid a copper mist of fine-spun hair about her face to remind him once more of that first night through the restaurant window.

A startled look crept into her eyes. She echoed softly, "Partners?"

"It's yours, most of it," he said. "I reckon I couldn't lay claim to it." His glance held hers, and then in utter confusion he blurted out, "I don't quite know how to say it, Helen. My place isn't much, but you could fix it up. I'm a cattleman and wouldn't know the first thing about runnin' a mine...I... Well..." He could go no further.

A gladness was in her eyes. "Ed," she said in a low voice, "is this a proposal?"

"It's meant to be." He smiled in sudden relief.

All at once she leaned down and kissed him. His two arms went about her and even the stab of pain in his shoulder went unheeded. ● END

NOT FOR REVENGE

(continued from page 50)

"Timber Allen. Never heard of him. Where's Timber Allen now?"

"He was still in town not long ago. Hanging around Holcomb's place."

"What's he look like?"

"Tough-looking customer. Eyes hard as stone. Packs two guns."

Finley said mildly, "I'd like to have it better than that, Mr. Dewberry. I'd like to know him when I lay eyes on him."

"Oh, no," Bonnie Brent murmured. "No, Ed. It can't help your father now. It won't—"

Finley looked at the girl, and his eyes were hard; then he turned his head and looked at Dewberry. The old man drummed on the counter with the fingertips of his right hand; and then he said, "That's no trouble, Ed. He's got a scar on his right cheek. A long, thin, white scar. It begins at his temple and extends down across his cheek and around the point of his chin."

Finley looked at Bonnie again, and now his eyes were strangely tender. "You think I'll trail him down and kill him, don't you?"

She did not answer, but met his gaze steadily, questioningly.

He shook his head, and a grim little smile quirked one corner of his mouth. "You don't need to worry," he said. "I won't." ● END

STATEMENT REQUIRED BY THE ACT OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AS AMENDED BY THE ACTS OF MARCH 3, 1933, AND JULY 2, 1946 (Title 19, United States Code, Section 233) SHOWING THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION OF

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1. The names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Stadium Publishing Corporation, 655 Madison Ave., N. Y. 21, N. Y.; Editor, Robert O. Erisman, 655 Madison Ave., N. Y. 21, N. Y.; Business manager, Abraham Goodman, 655 Madison Ave., N. Y. 21, N. Y.

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5. The average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the 12 months preceding the date shown above was: (This information is required from daily, weekly, hemiweekly, and triweekly newspapers only.)

ABRAHAM GOODMAN
(Signature of business manager)

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 27th day of September, 1955.

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LOOK AT
SKINNY!
I wouldn't be seen with him!
LATER
AM I PROUD OF THE WAY THE GIRLS LOOK AT YOU!
—AND HE USED TO BE SO SKINNY!
WHAT A MAN!

SKINNY

MEN ARE OFTEN ASHAMED TO STRIP FOR SPORTS OR FOR A SWIM!

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CHILDREN WHO WON'T EAT AND ARE UNDER-WEIGHT, OFTEN CALLED SKINNY!

Now at last More-Wate plan that puts firm, attractive pounds and inches on your body, chest, arms and legs.

Amazing New Way developed by modern medical science to put on weight on lean bodies. **Guaranteed** to give you up to an **extra pound a day!** Or **your money back!** Why should you dread going to parties and socials, simply because you look scrawny and spindly? Why ever feel self-conscious about your body again? If you're **underweight*** . . . or just a little on the thin side, due to faulty appetite, or bad dietary habits, you can **put on up to a pound a day** of **attractive weight** without exercise . . . dangerous drugs . . . or special diet . . . and more quickly, more easily than you ever dreamed possible . . . with MORE-WATE. MORE-WATE contains no dangerous drugs . . . you **eat it like candy!** Yet . . . if you were to have this same prescription compounded to your order, it would cost you many times more. However, through this introductory offer, you can obtain **4-way** MORE-WATE tablets . . . a full 10 days' supply . . . for just $1.00 or a 30 day supply for only $2.98, plus a 10 day supply free, with an absolute money-back guarantee! Yes, try MORE-WATE for TEN DAYS . . . and if not entirely delighted with weight gained, return the unused supply for full refund! You've nothing to lose . . . and **weight to gain!** Act now! Stop being the guy or the gal that everyone calls "skimny." Stop being the guy or the gal who dreads summer and going to parties and socials because it means everyone will enjoy themselves and you won't. Don't be a wallflower, because you have a figure like a broomstick! **Gain more weight!**

10-DAY SUPPLY ONLY $1.

The 4-way MORE-WATE tablets are **unconditionally guaranteed** to put on weight . . . or it doesn't cost you a penny! MORE-WATE is a **delicious,** full strength, 4-way tablet . . . that combines not just one . . . or two . . . but 4 of the most amazing aids for **gaining weight** known to medical science. MORE-WATE is not a liquid . . . not a powder. It's delicious, **pleasant-tasting tablet!** It contains vitamin **B-12** . . . the **amazing red vitamin doctors** give many **underweight patients** in **hospitals** . . . It contains Iron that helps correct iron deficiency, anemia and builds rich, red blood. It contains appetite-building vitamin B-1 . . . and it contains nutritious easily assimilated malt, the amazing ingredient that helps your body turn much of the food you eat into **well rounded flesh** instead of being wasted. **That's the secret of putting on weight.** Now you can help your food to **add new pounds** to your **arms, chest, hips, thighs,** and **legs.** Now you don't have to be skinny . . . or afraid to be seen socially and be ashamed of your figure! **You must achieve the figure you want . . .** or **don't pay anything.** Act now!

Not one child yet has failed to go for and ask for more MORE-WATE tablets! Stop worrying about children not eating enough, give them MORE-WATE tablets—it stimulates their appetite . . . they eat it like candy!

SENSATIONAL 10-DAY TEST!

Mail the coupon now! Test the amazing MORE-WATE tablet plan for 10 days at our expense. If after 10 days your friends, your mirror and your scale do not tell you that you have gained weight and look better you pay nothing!

MAIL THIS NO RISK TRIAL COUPON NOW!

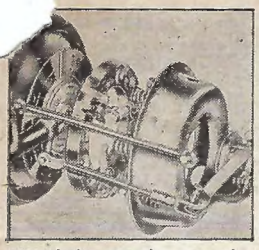
MORE-WATE CO., Dept. 212
318 Market Street, Newark, N. J.
Just mail us your name and address, and $1.00 cash, check or money order. You will receive a 10 day supply of MORE-WATE tablets and plan, postage prepaid.

☐ Send me 30 day supply plus an extra 10 day supply (that's a 40 day supply) for $2.98. I understand that if I am not delighted with MORE-WATE tablets and plan, I can return the 30 day supply in 10 days for full purchase price refund, and keep the 10 day supply without charge.

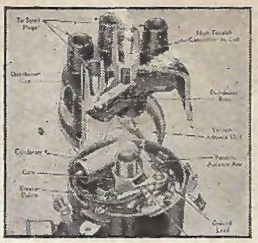
NAME.....ADDRESS.....

CITY.....STATE.....

SENT ON APPROVAL—MAKE AMAZING 10-DAY TEST

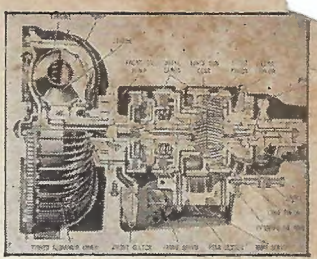


2900 photos and diagrams, plus crystal-clear directions, make every operation easy as A-B-C.



Diagrams, tables and text take the "mystery" out of all ignition systems.

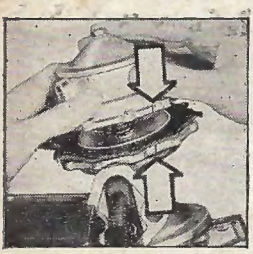
You get illustrated repair procedures for all types of carburetors.



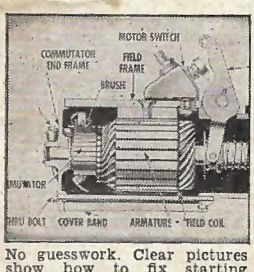
ALL AUTOMATIC TRANSMISSIONS are fully covered in special big section. (NOTE: All pictures shown here are greatly reduced in size. Actually, this giant book is almost a *foot high!*)

Here's the EASY Step-by-Step Way to

FIX ANY CAR IN A JIFFY!



Fuel pumps can cause trouble. Pictures show exactly how to take them apart, fix them.



No guesswork. Clear pictures show how to fix starting motor, generator, brakes, chokes, etc.

Just 2 of the Many Letters of Praise

Does Every Job. "My MOTOR Manual is a wonderful help. It has put me in a position to do every job." — *S. L. Sharpless, Los Angeles, Calif.*

Amazed Self and Friends. "I amazed myself and my friends, too. Now do jobs that stumped me before." — *Michael Baliczky, Newark, N. J.*

Now—Whether You're a Beginner or Expert Mechanic—You Can "Lick" Any Repair Job On Any Car Built From 1940 Thru 1955

NOW you can tackle any repair job, and do it quickly, easily, right—the *first* time! MOTOR'S *BRAND-NEW* AUTO REPAIR MANUAL shows you *how*—with crystal-clear pictures and step-by-step directions you can easily follow.

No guesswork. This giant guide tells you where to start; what tools to use. Leads you easily and quickly through the entire operation. Covers everything from a simple carburetor adjustment to a complete overhaul.

Everything You Need to Know

BIG, NEW REVISED Edition has MORE REPAIR INFORMATION THAN EVER! OVER 1,000 giant pages, 2,900 "This-Is-How" pictures — clear drawings, diagrams, cut-away photos—make every step EASY. 291 "Quick Check" charts—more than 23,436 essential repair specifications. Over 225,000 service and repair facts. Instructions and pictures so COMPLETE, so CLEAR — you CAN'T go wrong!

Even a green beginner can do a good job. If you're a top mechanic, you'll be amazed at the time-saving procedures.

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Rush to me at once: (Check box opposite book you want).

☐ **MOTOR'S New AUTO REPAIR MANUAL.** If okay, I'll remit just $2.00 in seven days, then $2.00 monthly for two months and a final payment of 95c (plus 35c delivery charges) one month after that. Otherwise, I'll return the book postpaid in seven days. (**Foreign price: Remit $9.00 cash with order.**)

☐ **MOTOR'S New TRUCK REPAIR MANUAL.** (Described at left.) If okay I will remit $2.00 in seven days, and $2.00 monthly for three months, plus 35c delivery charge with final payment. Otherwise, I will return book promptly. (**Foreign price: Remit $10.00 cash with order.**)

Print Name.....Age.....

Print Address.....

City & Zone No.....State.....

☐ **SAVE 35c** delivery charge by enclosing WITH COUPON check or money order for full payment of $6.95 for Auto Repair Manual (or $8.00 for Truck Manual.) Same 7-day return-for-refund privilege applies.

Same FREE 7-Day Offer on MOTOR'S NEW TRUCK REPAIR MANUAL

Covers EVERY job on EVERY popular make gasoline truck made from 1946 thru 1955—including GM and Cummins Diesels. Over 2,000 illustrations; 300,000 facts. Check proper box in coupon for free trial.

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Cadillac	Frazer	Oldsmobile
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J. E. SMITH trained more men for Radio-Television than any other man. OUR 40th YEAR.

America's Fast Growing Industry Offers You Good Pay—Bright Future—Security

I TRAINED THESE MEN

"Started to repair sets six months after enrolling. Earned $12 to $15 a week in spare time."—Adam Kramlik, Jr., Sunneytown, Pennsylvania.

"Up to our necks in Radio-Television work. Four other NRI men work here. Am busy with my work."—Peterson, Bradford,

m doing Radio and levision Servicing full e. Now have my own op. I owe my success to N.R.I."—Curtis Stath, Ft. Madison, Iowa.

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Training plus opportunity is the PERFECT COMBINATION for job security, good pay, advancement. In good times, the trained man makes the BETTER PAY, GETS PROMOTED. When jobs are scarce, the trained man enjoys GREATER SECURITY. NRI training can help assure you more of the better things of life.

Start Soon to Make $10, $15 a Week Extra Fixing Sets

Keep your job while training. I start sending you special booklets the day you enroll, that show you how to fix sets. Multitester built with parts I send helps you make $10, $15 a week extra fixing sets while training. Many start their own Radio-Television business with spare time earnings.

My Training Is Up-To-Date

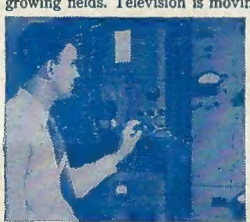
You benefit by my 40 years' experience training men at home. Well illustrated lessons give you basic principles you need. Skillfully developed kits of parts I send (see below) "bring to life" things you learn from lessons.

You Learn by Practicing with Parts I Send

Nothing takes the place of PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE. That's why NRI training is based on LEARNING BY DOING. You use parts I furnish to build many circuits common to Radio and Television. As part of my Communications Course, you build many circuits, including low power transmitter shown at left. You put it "on the air," perform procedures required of broadcast operators. With my Servicing Course you build modern Radio, etc.; use Multitester you build to make money fixing sets in spare time while training. You can stay at home, keep your job, learn Radio-TV in spare time at low cost. Mail coupon for book showing other equipment you build and keep.

The Tested Way To Better Pay!

Television Making Good Jobs, Prosperity—Even without Television, Radio is bigger than ever. 115 million home and auto Radios are big market for servicing. 3000 broadcasting stations use operators, technicians. Government, Aviation, Police, Ship, Micro-wave Relay, Two-way Radio Communications for buses, taxis, trucks, R. R. are growing fields. Television is moving ahead fast.



About 200 Television stations are now on the air. Hundreds of others being built. Good TV jobs opening up for Technicians, Operators, etc.

25 million homes now have Television sets. Thousands more are being sold every week. Get a job or have your own business selling, installing, servicing.

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Without obligating you in any way, I'll send an actual lesson to prove that my training is practical, thorough; 64-page book to show good job opportunities for you in Radio-TV. Terms for NRI training are as low as $5 a month. Many graduates make more in two weeks than total cost of training. Mail coupon now. J. E. SMITH, President, National Radio Institute, Dept. 5AU9 Washington 9, D. C. OUR 40TH YEAR.

Good for Both—FREE

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National Radio Institute, Washington 9, D. C.
Mail me Sample Lesson and 64-page Book, FREE.
(No salesman will call. Please write plainly.)

Name.....Age.....

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